

# That Strangest of American Places

In the United States of the early twentieth century, a period of extraordinary artistic and literary activity and experimentation, Taos, New Mexico, emerged as one of the country's most vital artists' communities. The area became a gathering place for networks of painters and artists who took inspiration from the southwestern landscape and the Native American cultures that had inhabited the region for centuries. Many came to the Southwest in search of spiritual enlightenment or an escape from the increasing industrialization of American cities. Taos, "that strangest of American places," as Mabel Dodge Luhan once wrote, and the whole southwestern region of the United States, supported formal artists' colonies and informal communities of writers and painters, and aided in the development of American literary and artistic culture throughout the century.

In 1898, painters Ernest Blumenschein and Bert Phillips settled in Taos after their carriage broke down nearby. There they founded the artists' colony that was to become a nationally known community of American painters. In 1915, area artists formed the Taos Society of Artists in an effort to more effectively market their work in the eastern United States; by this time, however, the community was already coming apart under the strain of many strong and conflicting personalities. A new, formidable personality entered the Taos landscape in 1917, when Mabel Ganson Dodge Stern arrived there with her husband, painter Maurice Stern. Another artists' community, one that included a shifting collection of some of the most important painters among the American Modernists and some of the most well-known writers of the period, grew up around her. Thus, Taos, or "Mabeltown" as D. H. Lawrence called it, remained a center of artistic activity in the region and in the United States.

Not long after her arrival in New Mexico, Mabel Stern divorced her husband, married a Taos Indian named Tony Lujan, and changed her name to Mabel Dodge Luhan, adopting an Anglo version of her new husband's name. Already a major influence in the artistic and intellectual communities in New York City and in Europe, Luhan was to become a central figure among a new community in Taos. This second generation of artists in the region included many painters and writers who came at Luhan's urging and stayed for weeks or months at her home, a sprawling complex of adobe buildings known as Los Gallos. Some eventually owned their own homes in the area, permanently relocating from New York (as Luhan had), the American Midwest, and abroad.

Though the women who visited Los Gallos or otherwise found their way to the Southwest included well-known figures in American arts and letters such as Georgia O'Keeffe and Willa Cather, lesser-known women also forged significant careers in the region. They were not part of a formal group or colony, but painters Dorothy Brett, Rebecca Salsbury James, and Mary Foote, writers Mary Hunter Austin and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, and poet and editor Alice Corbin Henderson crossed paths and

formed a loosely constructed artistic community in the region. Another more geographically distant artist, California photographer Anne Brigman, shared artistic influences and elements of a common aesthetic sensibility with some of the women in New Mexico. Not least of these similarities was an attentiveness to the regional landscape, a curiosity about and love of the natural world, and an interest in artistic innovation and experimentation.

The women in this group relocated to the Southwest from all over the United States and, in the case of Dorothy Brett, from the court of Queen Victoria in England. They came for varied reasons, of course, but many sought self-determinism, artistic independence, and freedom from the socially prescribed roles women were expected to occupy elsewhere. Sergeant and Henderson came under doctors' advice, hoping the dry climate would improve their poor health; some wanted refuge from other difficulties in their lives, family demands, or overbearing husbands. Some came simply because Mabel Luhan invited them.

The women whose lives and work are considered here were all profoundly awed and inspired by the landscape of the American Southwest and the lives of its inhabitants. Luhan wrote *Winter in Taos*, which many believe to be her best book, about an average day in the life she and Tony shared at Los Gallos. Some of O'Keeffe's most easily recognized paintings are of the New Mexican landscape and the sun- and sand-washed bones she found in the desert; Brett is best known for her *Ceremonials* paintings of Native American dances and rituals. Rebecca Salsbury James made the first of her reverse-glass paintings, the technique that was to become her signature, at Mabel Luhan's home in Taos.

Rebecca Salsbury James, Alice Corbin Henderson, and Willa Cather took the varied spiritualities they found in the landscape and its residents as a subject of their work. Anne Brigman peopled her landscape photographs with women depicting mythical and mystical beings; Mary Hunter Austin's books exploring the southwestern landscape, her place in it, and its relationship to her writing have made her an important American nature writer. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant wrote often of New Mexico's Native American communities; she also profiled the region's artists and writers in her work. For some, the region inspired political action as well as artistic production. Austin, Henderson, and Luhan, along with Sergeant, were moved by the plight of the Taos Indians to become politically active on their behalf, helping to secure their land against federal laws that would divide tribal lands among white residents of the region.

Mabel Dodge Luhan had a history of both social activism and artistic community building long before she arrived in Taos in 1917. Born in Buffalo, New York, in 1879, she left the city as a young widow

in 1904. While traveling to Europe, she met her second husband, Edwin S. Dodge; the couple bought and renovated the Villa Curonia, a country home near Florence, Italy. She became known across Europe for the style and impeccable taste with which she decorated and furnished the villa. Hostess to an international group of artists and writers, she entertained Eleonora Duse, André Gide, Carl Van Vechten, Neith Boyce and Hutchins Hapgood, Mina Loy, and Muriel Draper. Describing her hostess in Florence, Draper wrote: “In her haunted villa sat Mabel Dodge....Once in the room, the slightly unbalanced scale upon which it was built, the ‘rich man’s red’ brocade with which the walls were covered, disappeared in the definite visible atmosphere that Mabel Dodge always creates about her within four walls.”<sup>1</sup> Draper continued:

Mabel did not speak. Words were too slow for her. She went quickly into where you lived and found you there, while you were still in the first throes of verbal communication. She was patient. She would wait for you. If you wanted to catch up another time, you would find her there, sitting.<sup>2</sup>

Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein also stayed at Mabel Dodge’s Italian villa. While visiting in 1912, Stein wrote *Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia*, often described as a Cubist word picture of Dodge. Stein’s subject, in return, had the piece published in a run of 300 copies and bound in brightly colored Florentine wallpaper.

The same year, Mabel Dodge returned to the United States and settled in New York City. Her apartment in Greenwich Village soon became famous as a gathering place of the city’s most talented, interesting, and notorious individuals. Decorating her rooms in white, a very unusual color at that time, Mabel Dodge showed off her remarkable collection of furnishings and artwork to activists, artists, and intellectuals including Margaret Sanger, Lincoln Steffens, Emma Goldman, Marsden Hartley, Carl Van Vechten, and Max Eastman.

Mabel’s marriage to Edwin Dodge ended shortly after they returned to the United States, and she became involved with journalist and labor activist John Reed. In 1913, she participated in planning both the groundbreaking Armory Show of new Postimpressionist artwork, and the Paterson Strike Pageant, which staged a reenactment performance of the silk workers strike in Paterson, New Jersey, to a sellout crowd at Madison Square Garden. She regularly lent her famous name, and often her money, to political and artistic causes in which she believed. More influential than these single events, however, were the many “evenings” she hosted in her home; her salon, which met as often as three times a week, became a vital center of political and aesthetic debate and discussion. These meetings were so popular and of such great interest to her New York neighbors that they were regularly covered

in the city newspapers. “Imagine,” she wrote of her salon, “a stream of beings passing in and out of those rooms; one stream where many currents mingled together for a little while.” She continued:

Socialists, Trade-Unionists, Anarchists, Suffragists, Poets, Relations, Lawyers, Murderers, “Old Friends,” Psychoanalysts, I.W.W.’s, Single Taxers, Birth Controlists, Newspapermen, Artists, Modern-Artists, Clubwomen, Women’s-place-is-in-the-home-Women, Clergymen, and just plain men all met there and, stammering in an unaccustomed freedom a kind of speech called Free, exchanged a variousness in vocabulary called, in euphemistic optimism, Opinions!<sup>3</sup>

Mary Foote, a successful portrait painter, was a regular guest at Mabel’s Greenwich Village home. During the 1910s, Foote visited the Villa Curonia in Italy and later she spent summers with the Luhan in Taos. Born in Connecticut, where she lived in the same neighborhood as Samuel Clemens and his family, Foote studied painting first at Yale University and later with John Singer Sergeant in Paris, where she counted Henry James and James McNeill Whistler among her friends. When she returned to the United States from Europe, Foote settled in New York City. In her Washington Square studio, she painted commissioned portraits of many well-known people of the period including Ruth Draper, Jo Davidson, and Carrie Chapman Catt. In spite of her considerable success as a portraitist, Foote gave up painting in 1928 in the aftermath of a failed love affair. Seeking therapy from Carl Jung, she moved to Zurich, Switzerland, where she became Jung’s student as well as his patient; her notes from his talks were the basis for *The Visions Seminars* (1976). Muriel Draper, Foote’s fellow guest at the Villa Curonia, noted that the painter’s presence among the *mélange* of guests was quite welcome: “I cannot conceive of more conflicting psychological elements meeting under similar conditions without an explosion,” Draper wrote. “Almost everyone was in love or hate and only Mary Foote could come cutting through the snarled air like a cool smooth silver fruit-knife, severing at the crucial moments the crossed threads that were in danger of becoming firmly knotted entanglements.”<sup>4</sup> Foote’s portrait of Mabel Dodge, painted in 1915, captures the hostess during the exciting period of her Greenwich Village salon days.

After her split with Reed, Mabel Dodge fell in love with and married an artist, Maurice Stern, and eventually followed him to New Mexico. Their relationship didn’t last, but Luhan remained in New Mexico settling north of Santa Fe, near Taos Pueblo. Shortly after her arrival, she built the home that would, like the Villa Curonia and her Village apartment, become an artistic and cultural center. To the shock of many in New York, and in Taos Pueblo, she married Tony Lujan, a Taos Pueblo Indian. Of Mabel’s fourth husband and the changes he brought about in her life, her friend Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant wrote:

In “Tony,” a tall virile Indian, full of racial pride and power, with his parti-colored blanket, his two long braids wound with colored tape, and his religious nature, Mabel Stern seems to have met, for the first time, a man who could make a captious, powerful woman, herself a “mover and shaker,” into a relatively stay-at-home wife.<sup>5</sup>

Though she had dabbled in painting and poetry throughout her life and had written a newspaper column in New York, in Taos, Mabel Dodge Luhan found her most compelling subject—her own life—and wrote her most successful and memorable work. Her impressive four-volume autobiography, *Intimate Memories* (1933-37), begins with her family and her childhood in Buffalo, and dedicates individual volumes to her experiences in Europe, her salon days in Greenwich Village, and her spiritual awakening in New Mexico. *Intimate Memories* provides as significant a portrait of Luhan’s era and of her contemporaries as it does of her own life. In Taos, she also wrote the important portraits *Lorenzo in Taos* (1932) about her friend D. H. Lawrence, and *Una and Robin* (1976), a tribute to poet Robinson Jeffers and his wife.

Luhan did not cease to be politically active when she moved to New Mexico; she became involved in fighting for the rights of Pueblo Indians in Taos and the surrounding area and in helping white Americans gain a greater understanding of Pueblo life. She wrote numerous articles on aspects of Native American culture for major East-Coast magazines. Luhan played a key role in preventing passage of the odious Bursum Bill, which, if passed, would have stripped Pueblo Indians of their tribal lands and turned the properties over to white squatters. Always interested in unconventional religious beliefs, she found a new, Native American–influenced spirituality in Taos. She developed a deep connection to the region and remained there for the rest of her life.

Among the many visitors to Los Gallos, Georgia O’Keeffe was perhaps the most famous of the women who worked in the studios at Mabel Dodge Luhan’s home, and she was the artist whose work came to be most closely associated with the region. O’Keeffe first visited New Mexico in 1929 and she returned every summer for some twenty years until her husband, the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, died in 1946; she then moved permanently to Abiquiu, New Mexico, where she lived for much of the rest of her life. O’Keeffe’s paintings of the southwestern landscape and its architecture are considered by critics to be among her most important work.

Born in Wisconsin, O’Keeffe studied painting at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Art Students League in New York, and the University of Virginia, before becoming involved in art education, first in Amarillo and later in Canyon, Texas. In 1916, a friend sent a group of O’Keeffe’s drawings to

photographer, critic, and gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz who immediately recognized O’Keeffe’s talent and arranged an exhibition of her work at his famous gallery, 291. He had not sought permission from the artist before hanging her drawings, and when she learned of the exhibition, O’Keeffe was infuriated. She traveled to New York to confront him, but Stieglitz quickly convinced her to let the show continue. O’Keeffe’s work attracted considerable attention from critics and viewers. “Behind these delicate, frequently immense, feminine forms the world is distant,” one critic wrote. “Poised and quick—elate—teeming a deep rain; erect, high, wide turning, unrequited in silent space this vision is exclusive to simple reality. . . . These drawings are given passive and tumultuous upon the air.”<sup>6</sup> Encouraged by the exhibition’s success, O’Keeffe soon gave up her work as director of the art department at West Texas State Normal School and moved to New York to focus on her own painting. Though Stieglitz was married, the two moved in together. In 1924, after he obtained a divorce from his first wife, Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O’Keeffe were married.

In the early years of their marriage, O’Keeffe split her time between New York City and Stieglitz’s family home in Lake George, New York. She began to make the enormous paintings of flowers that helped her gain the attention of the art world. She also made a series of paintings of the New York City skyline; this group includes the 1927 painting *Radiator Building, Night, New York* in which her husband’s name appears in the lights of the skyline. In this painting, art critic Katharine Kuh noted that O’Keeffe “recognized how darkness purifies a scene as it eliminates all the details that clutter it in daylight. . . . Buildings are virtually annihilated, leaving only light and space to create an illusion of perforated atmosphere where space becomes more important than form.”<sup>7</sup>

O’Keeffe continued to show paintings at galleries, including another of Stieglitz’s galleries, An American Place, or “The Room” it was known to artists and photographers. Of seeing O’Keeffe at an exhibition of her work at An American Place, Dorothy Brett wrote:

As she reveals herself in her painting, so she reveals herself to those who have seen her in the Room—in her black and whiteness—the straight upright figure—the smooth dark swiftly drawn back hair—the long subtle hands—graceful with the grace of the painted lilies—to see Georgia O’Keeffe pick up a flower is to know the grace of her hands and of her painting—to look at her well poised head is to know the unsparing search of a mind bent on perfection and truth—a mind unafraid—that will be true to its purpose unfalteringly—that takes the life of a flower—of a colour—of a form and brings them forth again in a birth that is Immaculate and Incorruptible.<sup>8</sup>

Through Stieglitz, O’Keeffe met the photographer Paul Strand, a member of the Photo-Secession group, and his wife, Rebecca. Rebecca Salsbury James, known to her friends of this period as Beck Strand, shared a close friendship with O’Keeffe. The two women traveled together to New Mexico during the summer of 1929; it was O’Keeffe’s first trip to the region. During this trip, O’Keeffe was to become Beck Strand’s mentor as a painter and her lover.

The paintings O’Keeffe made during her 1929 visit to Taos stood in contrast to her previous work. Her compelling studies of the New Mexico landscape included the Rancheros church, Penitente crosses, and her remarkable view from beneath the Lawrence Tree near Dorothy Brett’s cabin. Luhan credited the painter’s stunning achievements in these canvases to the high altitude and to O’Keeffe’s spiritual connection to the landscape. In 1931, Luhan described the effect of the high altitude on her friend:

Take an exquisite sensitive mortal like Georgia O’Keeffe who is so specialized that she is like no one else is unique, is as unlike other human beings as a dryad at the bottom of a tarn, seems outside people’s codes, customs, and all folkways and suddenly lift her from sea level to the higher vibrations of a place such as Taos and you will have the extraordinary picture of her making whoopee! Her whoopee is of the finer nerves, the more poignant vision, awarenesses few others even dream of and perceptions that have to remain esoteric to the majority. Far more important than her painting is her Being, of course, but her Being is her own while her paintings belong to the world. And when her spirit soared up into the mystical strange fastness of that strangest of American places called Taos, it came back with the partial vestiges of her experience that we know as her Art, and we can trace there somewhat of her benefit, her added life and her joy, so that we know it did her what is called good and thus we share somewhat in her fate.<sup>9</sup>

Near the end of her first trip to Taos, O’Keeffe wrote a note to her hostess, who had fallen ill and traveled to Buffalo, New York, for treatment. Though by this time the women had had a falling out from which their relationship would never fully recover, O’Keeffe remained genuinely grateful for her first summer in Taos. “Dear Mabel,” O’Keeffe wrote, “it is 5 A.M. and I have been up for about an hour—watching the moon grow pale—and the dawn come.” She continues, thanking Luhan, “I wish I could see you this morning—more than that I wish I could tell you how important these months have been to me—Maybe you know.”<sup>10</sup>

Beck Strand, too, was deeply affected by the 1929 trip to Taos; it was during that summer that she experienced her most significant development as a painter to date. She discovered glass painting—after adopting O’Keeffe’s habit of using a piece of glass as a palette—the technique that would lead to many of her most striking and successful works, including *Edge of the Campo Santo, Taos, New Mexico*.

Though she never formally studied painting, her glass paintings demonstrate considerable skill and talent. Like O’Keeffe, she would eventually relocate to New Mexico permanently.

Rebecca Salsbury was the daughter of Nathan Salsbury, creator and part-owner of *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show*. She was born in London while the show was touring Europe, and though she was raised in New Jersey, the culture of the American West played a significant role in her childhood. In describing photographs from the *Buffalo Bill Show*, James listed the following images:

Indians, cowboys, buffaloes, Bill Cody on horseback, Bill Cody on foot, Bill Cody in his tent, Bill Cody out of his tent, the old stagecoach, U.S. cavalry riders, Cossacks, lady cowboys, horses, horses, horses, tents, tents, tents, cowboys, cowboys, cowboys, Bill Cody, my father, Nate Salsbury in a high silk hat.<sup>11</sup>

While working as a secretary in New York, Rebecca Salsbury met Paul Strand, a photographer and member of Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession movement. They were married in 1922 and she became a member of the artists’ community gathered around Stieglitz’s galleries. She developed friendships not only with O’Keeffe and Stieglitz, but also with Marsden Hartley, whose own experimentation with reverse glass painting is also believed to have influenced Beck Strand’s early attempts at glass painting.

Surrounded by artists, Beck Strand struggled to find an appropriate outlet for her own creative impulses. There can be no doubt that the many great talents and powerful personalities around her complicated her own artistic efforts. In Taos, O’Keeffe had considerable influence on her as a painter, but she was not always a fair critic or teacher. She could be a very encouraging and thoughtful adviser, but when Strand began to achieve some success in her work O’Keeffe’s attitude changed. “Georgia could encourage Beck only when the latter was floundering,” O’Keeffe and Stieglitz biographer Benita Eisler tells us, when “Beck seemed to be finding direction of her own, Georgia turned patronizing and spiteful.”<sup>12</sup>

In 1932, a joint exhibition of Paul and Beck Strand’s work was mounted at Stieglitz’s An American Place. Beck Strand’s glass paintings were well received, if considered somewhat naïve. Her work, rooted in the Arts and Crafts tradition, contrasted with the Modernist sensibilities of many of her contemporaries. Some of her ideas about art and possibly her goals as a painter can be gleaned from her fractured description of photography as an art, versus its use as a documentary medium. In the photographs taken by her husband and Stieglitz, Strand witnessed:

Objects becoming essences of themselves, related to each other, becoming unities. Photographs. Not like the others, not mere records, not things just looked at, but SEEN. Through a machine something new

emerging, something that did not exist before....No evasion, no tricks, plenty of sharpness. The real SHOW, the real SHOW, the real SHOW. You can look at the things and see the real SHOW going like BLAZES.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the artistic and aesthetic exchanges that took place, there was a certain emotional and sexual permissiveness at play among these women, a quality evident in their various love affairs. Painter and poet Marsden Hartley remarked to his friend Beck Strand about the complex social climate of the place, stating that Taos is “another spelling for Chaos.”<sup>14</sup> There is some evidence that in addition to her affair with Beck Strand, O’Keeffe became at various times romantically involved with Paul Strand, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Tony Luhan. Before her trip with O’Keeffe in 1929, Beck Strand spent time with Alfred Stieglitz at his home in Lake George, where she became both his model and his lover. Mabel Luhan, too, carried on a number of intellectual and sometimes physical love affairs with writers and artists, including Jean Toomer and D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence’s relationships with his “Three Fates” in Taos—his wife Frieda, Mabel Luhan, and painter Dorothy Brett—were notoriously complicated and contentious.

Mabel Luhan encouraged Lawrence to move to Taos, believing that he was the writer most capable of conveying the nature of both the Native American people and the southwestern landscape. For his part, Lawrence was in search of a place to found a utopian community he planned to call Rananim, after a line from a Hebrew funeral song. When he invited friends in his literary circle in England to join him and his wife Frieda in creating Rananim near Taos, only the Honorable Dorothy Brett agreed to join them.

Born to a noble London family, Dorothy Brett was raised in the court of Queen Victoria, where she was a playmate of the Queen’s grandchildren. In 1887, when she was four years old, Dorothy Brett experienced something of the American West for the first time when she saw a London engagement of Nathan Salsbury’s *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show*. Many years later, in 1924, in spite of her family’s disapproval, Brett followed Lawrence to New Mexico; she was to stay permanently in the region, and she eventually became a United States citizen.

As a young woman, Dorothy Brett, who was called simply Brett by her friends, studied painting at the Slade School of Art. Still in her early twenties, she had begun to lose her hearing. She was almost completely deaf by the time she finished school, and she was dependent on a flat, tin, trumpet-shaped hearing aid for the rest of her life. This, coupled with her extreme shyness, made Brett an unusual character. Nevertheless, she became acquainted with the literary set known as the Bloomsbury Group. Brett’s work from this period includes paintings of British celebrities, friends, and acquaintances including Aldous Huxley, Katherine Mansfield, and D. H. Lawrence.

Mabel Dodge Luhan did not like Brett when they met in 1924; not only did she find the painter socially awkward, Brett also represented competition for Lawrence's notice, and Luhan did not care to share his attention. Of her first encounter with Brett, Luhan wrote, "She was an amusing and attractive grotesque, and her eyes were both hostile and questioning as she came slowly up to me, examining me, curious, arrogant, and English." Brett's hearing aid, "an eavesdropper," particularly unnerved Luhan. "Do you think I liked it when I saw that brass dipper swallowing up all Lorenzo's talk to me?" Luhan wrote. "It was worse than Frieda's restraining influence."<sup>15</sup>

Brett found Mabel equally irritating. To their mutual friend, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, she wrote "Mabel was up here the other day in one of her flustering-bluster[ing] moods ...like a distraught tornado...I just could not cope... she is sometimes too terrific."<sup>16</sup> In spite of the tension that developed around their competition for Lawrence's attention, Luhan and Brett shared a long friendship as neighbors in Taos. Luhan was convinced of Brett's talent as a painter and she was an unwavering supporter of her work. She helped to promote her work among collectors in the East and to encourage exhibitions of Brett's paintings of the Native Americans of Taos Pueblo.

Shortly after their arrival in New Mexico, Brett and the Lawrences moved to Kiowa Ranch outside of Taos, a ranch that Mabel had given to Frieda in exchange for the original manuscript of her husband's novel, *Sons and Lovers* (1913). While the Lawrences lived in the small, central house on the property, Brett lived in a one-room cabin nearby. Lawrence and Brett became very close, and Brett developed a significant emotional attachment to the writer. She also became his typist. Among themselves, Luhan, Brett, and Frieda became known as Lawrence's Three Fates. In Brett's 1958 painting of this title, the three women appear at a table inside a cabin, while Lawrence can be seen seated under a tree beyond the door; Brett is in front of a typewriter, working on Lawrence's pages. "Though so strongly dissimilar in origins, looks, tastes, temper, and habit," Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant wrote of the three women, "they have this in common—they are fearless, dauntless, ruthless in the manner of the Queen who can do no wrong." Sergeant noticed, too, that the Three Fates shared a unique friendship in spite of their differences and antagonisms. "Though not above knifing one another in print," Sergeant wrote, "in daily life they do not bear grudges."<sup>17</sup>

Writer Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant lived in Taos for much of the 1920s and 1930s. A native of Massachusetts, Sergeant earned a degree from Bryn Mawr in 1903 after which she volunteered for social causes, traveled regularly to France, and wrote essays and stories. Sergeant's first article was published in *McClure's* in 1910. *McClure's* editor, Willa Cather, and Sergeant became friends; years later, Sergeant would recount their relationship in *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (1953). Sergeant spent several years as a

correspondent for the *New Republic* in New York. She made an impression on New York's literary society with her striking appearance; after meeting Sergeant at a party, poet Marianne Moore noted to a friend that she was memorably dressed, wearing an "old gold charmeuse with a raised flower design of medium blue, chiffon velvet roses, completed with a pendant in the shape of two, gold, realistic rattlesnakes . . . I don't know that they were rattlesnakes but they were very scaley."<sup>18</sup>

Sergeant relocated to Taos in 1920, while recovering from an injury she received during a tour of a French battlefield in 1918 as war correspondent for the *New Republic*. In Taos, she found a place within a community of regional writers that included Lawrence, Luhan, and Cather, a regular visitor, as well as the then well-known feminist and environmental writer Mary Hunter Austin. Sergeant also became, with Luhan and Austin, involved in the Indian rights movement. For many years, she volunteered with the American Indian Defense Association, and later, John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, hired her to assist him in his work. During this period, Sergeant wrote many articles about the Native American communities of the region and about New Mexico itself for East Coast magazines, including the *New Republic* and the *Nation*. She argued persuasively for the rights of Pueblo Indians, fighting against a proposed ban on native ceremonial dances and against the Bursum Bill. After attending an evening meeting of Pueblo Indians to discuss the bill, Sergeant wrote:

Every New Mexico citizen might have a large slice, as large a slice as he could possibly use, of this land. . . so vast and grandiose in the moonlight, without crowding a helpless and industrious people from the few acres which their ancestors had cleared in ages as dark to modern eyes as the peaks and mesas that loomed out of the night.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to her first book, *French Perspectives* (1916), and *Shadow-Shapes: Journal of a Wounded Woman* (1920), which described the circumstances of her injury and recovery in France during World War I, Sergeant wrote a novel, *Short as Any Dream* (1929). Though it was to be her only novel, *Short as Any Dream* received praise from other writers. "I think your book a very remarkable and promising first novel," Mary Austin wrote to Sergeant on 7 October 1929. "The book is full of interest and of vivid and revealing episodes," she continued:

I know of no modern author who has succeeded so well with the telling episode, except Willa Cather; but unlike Miss Cather's stories, yours does not plod between the episodes. You do just what I have always wished she would do, and pass from one high point to another without the necessity—which I find so wearisome in her books—of weaving them into a continuous narrative. Yours, I think, is much the better way, not only in respect to the literary craft, but actually in its relation to the way things happen.

Everybody has a lot of plodding to do, but I don't remember mine, and I should like to be spared that part of the lives of people I meet in books.<sup>20</sup>

In the course of her career, Sergeant wrote a great many biographical profiles of writers and other important American figures such as Robert Frost, Paul Robeson, Elinor Wylie, and Amy Lowell; she also wrote profiles of many friends and fellow writers in Taos. Some of Sergeant's biographical writings were collected in *Five Under the Andes* (1927); other profiles led to book-length biographies, including her study of the life and work of Willa Cather. Cather, who first visited the Southwest in 1912, became immediately fascinated with the landscape and traveled in the region often for the rest of her life, staying variously with Mary Austin and the Luhans.

Cather was raised in Red Cloud, Nebraska, where her tomboy insistence on wearing boys' clothing and short hair caused a stir among her conservative neighbors. Though she spent much of her adult life far from the Nebraska prairie, living at different times in Pittsburgh, New York City, and the Southwest, Cather nevertheless wrote throughout her life about the landscape and communities of her home state. Her many novels about the central plains states and their prairie farming communities, including *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Antonia* (1918), and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *One of Ours* (1926), are among the most important and influential texts written about this region. Cather's literary career began when she was an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska and her theatrical reviews and literary commentary began to appear regularly in Lincoln newspapers. After more than a decade as a journalist and editor, in 1911 she took the advice of her friend and mentor, Sarah Orne Jewett, and gave up her work to devote herself full-time to her writing.

Though she is best known for her novels of the American Midwest, some believe that Cather's most successful novel was *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), which takes place in New Mexico. Of the writing of this book, Sergeant wrote:

In those ruined cliff houses of the Southwest that Willa loved so well there is always a little low, shut-in storage cave at the back, where the corn for the year of dearth used to be piled away by the Indians. Such a cave of many-colored New Mexican corn Willa had had in the back of her mind for years. Suddenly she drew on it and was released from the long hunger of the artist to communicate something of moment. The narrative, as she called *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, almost wrote itself, in a very short space of time, and the happy mood of its conception never left her.<sup>21</sup>

Another writer Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant profiled was the feminist nature writer, Mary Hunter Austin. Though her work is no longer widely read, in “Mary Austin: A Profile,” published in the *Saturday Review of Literature* shortly after Austin’s death in 1934, Sergeant described Austin as “the leading literary figure of the Southwestern world, and perhaps the most monumental of our American women writers.”<sup>22</sup> Considering the fact that Austin was the author of more than thirty successful books and hundreds of articles in periodicals, Sergeant was hardly exaggerating. Because many of her books explored the western landscape and her relationship to it, Austin is often remembered as an early nature writer. These books, including *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) and *California: The Land of the Sun* (1914), helped to define a popular conception of the American Southwest. Her writing about the region was widely read and praised by critics; of *The Land of Journeys’ End* (1924), a *New York Times* critic noted that Austin’s text was

written out of such knowledge of the region, its characteristics and inhabitants as, possibly, is shared by no other general writer, and with an understating, love and sympathy that tip her pen with flame and color. . . . Mrs. Austin writes . . . with singular force and charm and with an intensity of conviction . . . that is truly stimulating.<sup>23</sup>

Austin was also a committed feminist, and much of her work explores feminist ideas—including equality in marriage, and women’s desire to participate in intellectually challenging and rewarding work—that were considered quite radical in her time. Her novels were well respected and influential; her auto-biographical feminist novel *A Woman of Genius* (1912) is believed by some to have been an inspiration for Willa Cather in the writing of her novel, *The Song of the Lark* (1915).

Austin grew up in Illinois; her mother, an emotionally distant woman, was nothing if not indifferent to her daughter’s ambitions to become a writer. In fact, she discouraged her intellectual curiosity and self-sufficiency. Though Austin moved with her mother and brother to southern California as a young woman, she soon married to escape her family’s control; she was twenty-three. Her marriage was not a successful one. Her husband was irresponsible and unable to handle the family’s finances. Austin learned of their significant debt only when they were evicted from their home; Austin was pregnant at the time. Their only child, a daughter, was born with autism. Unwilling to give up her writing, Austin often left home for days at a time to join other writers in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Once she had earned enough money through her writing to secure stable private care for her daughter, Austin left her husband and joined a vital writers’ colony in Carmel, California, that included Jack London and Upton Sinclair.

Before settling in Santa Fe in 1924, Austin traveled extensively in Europe and lived for several years in Greenwich Village in New York City. Her friends from this period included Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger, and she was active in the fight for women's suffrage and for legalizing birth control. During this period, she attended Mabel Dodge Luhan's soirees. Luhan remembered Austin's appearance at her salon one evening when Emma Goldman and Bill Haywood were the featured guests: "Mary Austin sat with her lips thrust out and her eyelids heavy, her gray hair coiled high, portentous in prairie-colored satin."<sup>24</sup> Austin was invited to lecture at the salon on another evening; as she was already quite familiar with the Southwest by this time, scholars speculate that Austin may have been among the first people to pique Mabel's interest in the region. In spite of their friendship and shared love of the region, their relationship was not without conflict; during one of Austin's visits to Los Gallos, Mabel Luhan wrote her friend Neith Boyce Hapgood, "Mary Austin has [stayed] so long and *won't* go! All—since early spring—summer!"<sup>25</sup>

Though she had much success in New York, Austin found a greater sense of peace in the southwestern landscape. "With every year in Santa Fe," Sergeant wrote, "she grew gentler, richer in feeling, more related to earth and its creatures and less harried by her peccadilloes." Austin felt a significant connection to Santa Fe; Sergeant recalled her saying, "I shall never leave Santa Fe when I die—you know that? . . . I will live on there near those Spanish and Indian people whom I loved."<sup>26</sup>

Santa Fe was also home to Alice Corbin Henderson, who for many years co-edited with Harriet Monroe *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*, perhaps the most influential American literary magazine of the twentieth century. First published in Chicago in 1912, *Poetry* "introduced and printed nearly every major figure in twentieth-century poetry and served as a forum for critical debate on a number of fundamental aesthetic issues."<sup>27</sup> Henderson and Monroe published the early work of poets such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, H. D., Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and Wallace Stevens, helping to define American Modernism. Though she played an important role in *Poetry's* crucial early years, both as an editor and as a contributor of critical commentary, Henderson's involvement with the magazine has gone largely unexamined while credit for *Poetry's* remarkable influence on contemporary literature has been primarily attributed to Harriet Monroe and contributing editor Ezra Pound. Eunice Tietjens, an associate editor at *Poetry*, describes Henderson's influence in her memoir, *The World at My Shoulder*:

Alice was small, crisp, and incisive, full of an enduring energy in spite of a frail physique, and a thoroughgoing modern with an unflinching ear for the cadence of a new voice. Much of the attitude of the magazine towards the experimentation in new technique which was then beginning was due to her. She plugged wittily and indefatigably for the new, the untried. She was more susceptible even than Harriet herself to

the possibilities of the future. She was the first of us who truly grasped the quality of the Imagists, then beginning in London, and of the elliptical school of which T. S. Eliot became the most noted protagonist . . . [Her] taste is permanently stamped on the magazine.<sup>28</sup>

After being diagnosed with tuberculosis, Henderson left Chicago and moved to New Mexico in 1916. She arrived in the Southwest just a year before Mabel Luhan did, and was a fashionable hostess in Santa Fe when Mabel arrived there in 1917; by this time, Henderson's home had already become a gathering place for a group of area writers and artists. Though Luhan's husband at the time, Maurice Stern, already had a studio in Santa Fe, she was immediately impatient to leave the city and move on to Taos. "Her claim that the city was too tame and conventional for her tastes," Lois Palken Rudnick writes in *Mabel Dodge Luhan: New Woman, New Worlds*, "was very likely related to the fact that it had already been 'discovered' by another woman writer and patroness . . . Mabel wanted her own domain."<sup>29</sup> The two women met for the first time at a tea party shortly after Mabel arrived in Santa Fe; Luhan described the meeting in the final volume of her memoirs, *The Edge of Taos Desert*:

A small woman sat on one of the day-beds knitting a khaki-colored sweater. She was presented: Mrs. Henderson. She smiled, they all smiled. Maurice smiled. I tried to and couldn't. I felt dead. We had tea and Mrs. Henderson began to talk about Harriet Monroe. Did I know her? I did. She framed words that showed me she and Harriet were co-editors of the *Poetry Magazine*. I didn't care.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of this unpromising meeting, the two women became friends of a sort; they shared a deep commitment to the land and people of the Southwest and worked together with other area artists and writers to defeat the Bursum Bill. In 1923, John Evans, Mabel's son from her first marriage, married Alice Corbin Henderson's daughter, "little Alice" as Mabel called her.

In spite of her failing health and her distance from *Poetry's* offices, Henderson continued to be active in the magazine's publication after moving to New Mexico. She also maintained regular correspondence with many writers, including Ezra Pound, Mary Austin, and Jean Toomer. In 1917, she collaborated with Monroe in editing an anthology of contemporary verse by one hundred poets, entitled *The New Poetry*. A path-breaking anthology, it included only work published after 1900; in asserting the importance of the contemporary, it was among the first anthologies to focus exclusively on the work of the new century. Though critics did not universally praise the collection, Henderson's and Monroe's astute and visionary editorship is evident in the fact that many of the poets whose work is included in the anthology are counted among the most important writers of the early twentieth century.

Throughout her career as an editor, Henderson called for the definition of a uniquely American poetry; on several occasions, her editorial commentary in *Poetry* “insisted that American poets ought not look to European models but rather create their work out of the particular experience in the United States.”<sup>31</sup> In New Mexico, Henderson’s commitment to American literary traditions translated easily into an interest in southwestern folklore and stories, including Native American songs and regional religious traditions; she wrote several books on related topics. One such book, *Brothers of Light: The Penitentes of the Southwest* (1937), was among the first sympathetic studies of the so-called “whipping brotherhoods,” and their controversial religious practices. She also edited an anthology of poetry concerned with New Mexico, *The Turquoise Trail* (1928), including work by Willa Cather, Mabel Dodge Luhan, and Mary Austin. Henderson was a poet in her own right; her collections of verse, including *Red Earth: Poems of New Mexico* (1920) and *The Sun Turns West* (1933), were well received. Though her books of poetry are out of print today, contemporary critics compared her writing to that of Emily Dickinson.

Though she never lived in New Mexico, photographer Anne Brigman can be considered a theoretical, if not actual, member of this group of artists and writers. In the early years of the twentieth century, Brigman was a pictorial photographer, a group that “[minimized] the mechanical realism of their camera work... by covering their lenses with gauze, mechanically placing the lens out of focus, and manipulating the negative.”<sup>32</sup> Pictorial photographers sought to achieve art with their cameras at a time when photography was viewed as a largely documentary medium. Left of center among pictorial photographers, Brigman was one of the first photographers to take the female nude in the natural landscape as a subject.

Brigman was born in Hawaii in 1869, the oldest of eight children born to a religious family; her grandparents traveled to Hawaii as missionaries and her parents shared their religious devotion. As a young woman, she moved to Oakland, California, where she married a ship captain. Though she sometimes traveled with her husband, his long absences allowed Brigman the freedom to pursue her interest in painting and writing. Friendships with other artists and writers, including Jack London and William Keith, encouraged her in her work. In 1901, Brigman began taking photographs and she soon devoted all her time to the practice; she developed her own work in a shed on her property that she converted into a darkroom.

Brigman shared numerous influences and aesthetic concerns with the women in Taos and Santa Fe. Though they hadn’t yet met or corresponded, Alfred Stieglitz named Brigman as a member of the Photo-Secessionist movement in an essay that helped to establish the group; the two photographers

soon began a long correspondence and friendship. Stieglitz was an important influence in Brigman's development as an artist; he encouraged her work and helped to establish her reputation in contemporary art circles, much as he would a few years later with Georgia O'Keeffe. Through Stieglitz, Brigman became acquainted with others in the Photo-Secessionist movement and the photography community beyond the San Francisco area. Brigman participated in the conversations among photographers prompted by pictorial photography and the project of the Photo-Secessionists in articles published in *Camera Work* and *Camera Craft*.

Like Mary Austin, Brigman took inspiration for much of her work from the California landscape. She took many of her photographs on extended camping trips in the mountains of the state; compared to other photographers, she took relatively few pictures, making varying prints from each of the best negatives. Though some photographers found the practice unorthodox, Brigman was known to manipulate her negatives "using pencils, paints, and etching tools to add or eliminate elements such as roots, a moon, or cloud forms."<sup>33</sup> Like that of Mary Austin, Brigman's work ties the female body to the natural world in a way that anticipates late twentieth-century ecofeminism and the societal and cultural connections it draws between women and the environment.

Brigman enjoyed considerable attention as a photographer in the 1910s when her photographs were well known and admired by photographers and others interested in the arts, including poet Marianne Moore, who was introduced to the photographer's work as an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr. Though Brigman faded from the art scene in California and New York in the 1920s, she continued to make photographs and her work appeared in an exhibition of photography and its history at New York's Julien Levy Gallery in 1931. In the 1930s, she also began taking writing classes. There is disagreement about whether Brigman turned to writing because failing eyesight made photography difficult. In any case, at the suggestion of her writing teacher, Brigman began to make collections of her poems and photos, one of which was published in 1949 as *Songs of a Pagan*. Though she compiled other collections, Brigman left them unfinished when she died in 1950.

Though they have not all been equally remembered or celebrated, the women who participated in the vital and volatile artistic community in the American Southwest in the first half of the twentieth century all made valuable contributions to the development of American art and literature. Their particular interest in and observation of the Southwest landscape and the Native American cultures inhabiting it have influenced Anglo-America's understanding of the region and its history, and have supported the preservation of native communities and cultures. The complicated social dynamics between and among members of the group did not inhibit them from producing innovative and influential literature and art.

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- 1 *Muriel Draper*, *Music at Midnight*, *New York: Harper*, 1929, p. 10.
  - 2 *Draper*, *Music at Midnight*, p. 12.
  - 3 *Mabel Dodge Luhan*, *Movers and Shakers*, *New York: Harcourt, Brace*, 1936, p. 83.
  - 4 *Draper*, *Music at Midnight*, pp. 120-21.
  - 5 *Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant*, "Sphinx of Taos Desert," *Saturday Review of Literature* (26 November 1938): 13.
  - 6 *C. Duncan*, quoted in *Alfred Stieglitz's exhibition review of "Georgia O'Keeffe—C. Duncan—René Lafferty" in Camera Work* 48 (October 1916): 12-13.
  - 7 *Katharine Kuh*, *Break-Up: The Core of Modern Art*, *Greenwich: New York Graphic Society*, 1965, p. 92.
  - 8 *Dorothy Brett*, "Remembered Life," unpublished manuscript, n.d., *Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe Archive*.
  - 9 *Mabel Dodge Luhan*, "Georgia O'Keeffe in Taos," *Creative Arts* 8.6 (1931): 410.
  - 10 *Georgia O'Keeffe to Mabel Dodge Luhan*, August 1929, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters. Jack Cowart and Juan Hamilton, letters selected and edited by Sarah Greenough*, *Washington: National Gallery of Art*, 1987, pp. 191-92.
  - 11 *Rebecca Salsbury James*, unpublished manuscript, n.d., *Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe Archive*.
  - 12 *Benita Eisler*, *O'Keeffe and Stieglitz, An American Romance*, *New York: Penguin*, 1991, pp. 393-94.
  - 13 *James*, unpublished manuscript, n.d.
  - 14 *Marsden Hartley to Rebecca Salsbury James*, [September 1930.] *Rebecca Salsbury James Papers*.
  - 15 *Mabel Dodge Luhan*, *Lorenzo in Taos*, *New York: Knopf*, 1932, p. 122.
  - 16 *Dorothy Brett to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant*, 28 September 1933, *Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant Papers*.
  - 17 *Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant*, "The Writers of New Mexico, I. Taos; Frieda, Mabel and Brett," *Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant Papers*.
  - 18 *Marianne Moore to Bryher*, 3 March 1921, *Bryher Papers*.
  - 19 *Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant*, "Big Powwow of Pueblos," *New York Times*, 26 November 1922.
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  - 21 *Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant*, *Willa Cather: A Memoir*, *Philadelphia: Lippincott*, 1953, p. 222.
  - 22 *Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant*, "Mary Austin: A Portrait," *Saturday Review of Literature* (8 September 1934): 96.
  - 23 "Land of Pueblos," *New York Times*, 12 October 1924.
  - 24 *Luhan*, *Movers and Shakers*, p. 88.
  - 25 *Mabel Dodge Luhan to Neith Boyce Hapgood*, n.d., *Hapgood Family Papers*.
  - 26 *Sergeant*, "Mary Austin: A Portrait," p. 96.
  - 27 *Jayne E. Marek*, *Women Editing Modernism: "Little" Magazines and Literary History*, *Lexington: University of Kentucky Press*, 1995, p. 23.
  - 28 *Eunice Tietjens*, *The World at My Shoulder*, *New York: Macmillan*, 1938, pp. 25-26.
  - 29 *Lois Palken Rudnick*, *Mabel Dodge Luhan: New Woman, New Worlds*, *Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press*, 1984, p. 146.
  - 30 *Mabel Dodge Luhan*, *Edge of Taos Desert*, *New York: Harcourt, Brace*, 1937, p. 22.
  - 31 *Marek*, *Women Editing Modernism*, p. 35.
  - 32 *Susan Ehrens*, *A Poetic Vision: The Photography of Anne Brigman*, *Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Art*, 1995, pp. 20-21.
  - 33 *Ehrens*, *A Poetic Vision*, p. 26.