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"Why I Write about Mexico": Mexicanness in Katherine Anne Porter's "Flowering Judas" and "María Concepción"

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In 1931, Waldo Frank, a renowned specialist in Latin American studies, observed in the *New Republic* that "for intelligent North Americans to visit Mexico begins to be a custom." He explained this trend by adding that "Mexico vaguely seems to offer from afar something which he lacks and craves" (quoted in Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* 197).

One of the authors who was most strongly drawn to and who felt an inexplicable kinship with Mexico in this period was Katherine Anne Porter. She traveled to Mexico repeatedly and spent almost three years of her life south of the border. This experience, she explains, satisfied her ill-defined but extremely powerful desire for "a straight, undeviating purpose" – and it had a decisive influence on her writing.

The main function of Porter's journeys to Mexico is both the literary construction and the actual experience of a space where she could explore the missing links of her own life. Powerful fictional characters, such as María Concepción, who murders her faithless lover, or the transcendentally sensual Laura, whose very existence is alienation, become reflections of the author herself, who felt deeply rifted, torn between what she perceived to be her own, fragmented identity and an essentialist, ultimately Romantic version of selfhood that she craved.

Mexico as a location and even more so as a concept has for a long time played a crucial role in the American imagination. From the early nineteenth century on, "Mexico, its culture and its people . . . has been an unavoidable presence in westward-moving America" (Robinson ix). Subject to extreme prejudice as much as naïve veneration, the country

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south of the border was (and still is) perceived as the essence of contradictoriness, associated with romantic myth, on the one hand (Robinson "Prologue"), and with backwardness and banditry, on the other (Berger 14). For Americans, Mexico is primarily a Mexico of the mind. It is constructed as a locus of difference – as a home to the wholly "other." As such, it is perceived as mysterious and inscrutable – arousing wonder and inquisitiveness but ultimately eluding explanation or comprehension. At the same time, Mexico is also uncanny – representing the strangely familiar – ranging from the feared to the repressed and the secretly desired. Most importantly, Mexico offers to the American imagination a chance for a temporary and (more or less) controlled consumption of "otherness." As Nicolas Bloom puts it, "Americans, even deep within Mexico, are primarily tourists or temporary expatriates" (2).

Historically, the American fascination with Mexico had a first, intense phase in the twentieth century that lasted from the early twenties to the late forties. In his recent study of the public intellectual exchange across the U.S.-Mexican border, José Antonio Aguilar Rivera describes the situation as follows:

> In the first decades of the twentieth century droves of American intellectuals visited and explored Mexico – not only radicals like Frank Tannenbaum but writers like Hart Crane and Katherine Anne Porter, photographers like Edward Weston as well as philosophers like John Dewey. (xi)[1]

In 1931, Waldo Frank, a renowned specialist in the field of Latin American literature, observed in the *New Republic* that "[f]or intelligent North Americans to visit Mexico begins to be a custom" (quoted in Delpar 197). He describes the appeal that Mexico has for the American intellectual as a promise to satisfy deeper needs: "Mexico vaguely seems to offer from afar something which he lacks and craves. And still more vaguely and deeply, Mexico seems to be his" (quoted in Delpar 197).

An American author who claimed Mexico for her own like no other is Katherine Anne Porter. She traveled to Mexico on four separate occasions early in her career, between 1920 and 1931, and spent altogether almost three years of her life in Mexico. Both the author herself and her critics agree that Mexico played a crucial role for Porter and her development as a writer. As Porter asserted in a talk entitled "The Mexico I Knew": "I am perfectly certain that my time in Mexico was one of the very important times of my life. It influenced everything I did after-

[1] For an overview of the long-term presence of prominent American (and British) writers in Mexico, see Drewey. Henry C. Schmidt also offers a detailed account of American intellectual presence there in the 1920s.

ward" (*Uncollected Early Prose* vii). Thomas Walsh, a critic thoroughly familiar with the details of Porter's Mexican experience, explains: "Porter's journal and letters give evidence that she viewed Mexico as a continual source for her creative writing. Seemingly nothing occurred that she did not weigh for its literary potential" (Unrue, *Critical Essays* 126). But while the connection between Porter's biography and her Mexican stories has been explored in great detail, little attention has been paid to the relationship between the ethnographical pieces she wrote during her Mexican period and her Mexican stories. As becomes evident from biographical sources and a number of texts she wrote in the early 1920s, Porter was passionately interested in ethnographic aspects of Mexican culture.[2] Apart from personal observations in locations she considered particularly authentic – Teotihuacán or Xochimilco – she drew from the vast knowledge of Mexican Indian culture of one of the most important experts in the field, the Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, with whose work she was closely acquainted (cf. Walsh 49). In what follows, I will argue that short stories like "María Concepción" and "Flowering Judas" profit particularly from being read against Porter's ethnographic texts – not so much to trace the sources of her realistic depiction of indigenous life, which has already been done (cf. Walsh 73), but to arrive at a renewed understanding of the principal female protagonists of her Mexican stories. Porter's use of ethnographic detail is not merely meant to provide local color – "Mexicanness" as oriental flavoring – the superimposition of such discourse onto her narrative is also supposed to create an arena for the presentation of character: unadulterated, primeval instinct vs. civilisatory diffidence and disorientation. Moreover, Porter uses the overlap between ethnography and story-telling in her own writing to construct fictional identities that would both describe and complement aspects of her own personality which she felt she was lacking. Such an assumption seems particularly justified when one considers how readily Porter replaced undesirable parts of her biography with inventions of her own – a strategy that has been observed by various critics (e.g., Givner, Walsh and Nance – see below). In many respects, Porter's writing serves as a substitute for essential aspects of her life. As she explained in an interview late in life: ". . . this thing between me and my writing is the strongest bond I have ever had – stronger than any bond or any engagement with any human being or any other work I've ever done" (Thompson 89).

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[2] The most important of these texts, among them "Xochimilco," "Notes on Teotihuacán," *Outline of Mexican Arts and Crafts* and "Two Ancient Pyramids – the Core of a City Unknown until a Few Years Ago" are reprinted in *The Uncollected Early Prose.*

Porter was keenly aware of the close ties between ethnography and story-telling – a link that would later be explored by Roland Barthes in a section entitled "The Ethnological Temptation" of his autobiographical *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. There he describes the allure and the authority of ethnography:

> the ethnological book has all the powers of the beloved book: it is an encyclopedia, noting and classifying all of reality, even the most trivial, the most sensual aspects. . . . of all learned discourse, the ethnological seems to come closest to a Fiction. (84-5)

Based on Barthes, arguing that "stories make meaning" (140), Edward Bruner points out that the anthropologist is likely to approach the object of study with a "story" in mind which determines not only the way he perceives and represents his findings but already influences the choice of his informants: "We choose those informants whose narratives are most compatible with our own" (151). Porter, I would argue, does precisely that: she picks anthropological models that fit her own needs, tells the alleged story of their lives and then inserts these "authentic" figures into her own stories. The "Mexicanness" that results from this procedure suggests supreme authority – descriptive of reality with the supposed authority of an encyclopedia complemented with the incontrovertibleness of myth, such as Porter's favorite, the Golden Age of Aztec rule. "Mexicanness" as a concept in Porter's narratives – a personal obsession with all things Mexican – is a complex formula consisting of four main components of very different natures: the Mexican version of Catholicism – in particular the omnipresent *Marianismo*, the American view of Mexico as a heterotopia – specifically of transgression and excess, the (also very American) perception of Mexico as a space that allows or even invites the temporary assumption of a different identity, and, finally, Porter's fascination with what she considered an overwhelming presence of the past. It is the last point – the role of the past – that needs to be given special consideration in the present context.

A text that is particularly suitable as a starting point for a discussion of Porter's Mexican experience is a short, strangely apologetic piece she published in 1923 entitled "Why I Write About Mexico" (*Collected Essays* 355-6). In one of the crucial passages, Porter describes what she considers the key component of Mexicanness: she admires the political development as a "straight, undeviating purpose" (*Collected Essays* 355) – a kind of immanent driving force or principle in other words that pursues its goals with unerring precision. The roots of this self-willed, self-determined purpose are formed by the past, as Porter explains: "It was as if an old field had been watered, and all the long-buried seeds flour-

ished" (*Collected Essays* 355). The present is, Porter believes, a result of the seeds of the past – in other words, the past determines the makeup of the present. If we carefully re-read "Why I Write About Mexico" with this in mind, and with an eye on Porter's references to her own past, the text yields up a number of surprising inconsistencies. Indeed, as closer inspection reveals, essential claims that the author makes about her Mexican experience are simply not true. To begin with, her assertion to have "returned to Mexico" in 1920 after a long "absence" is false – Porter had never been to Mexico before November 1920. Thus her second claim – that she witnessed a street battle between Maderistas and federal troops – is equally fabricated. These fights occurred in 1911 when Porter was in the USA, possibly in Chicago, according to Willene and George Hendrick, two of her early biographers. Furthermore, the story of her encounter with the old Indian woman (*Collected Essays* 355) is also an invention as the author herself later admitted (cf. Walsh 5). What we are facing here is indeed "an extreme instance of the inseparability of the writer's life and work" (vii), as William Nance puts it in *Katherine Porter and the Art of Rejection.* This notion is echoed by Joan Givner, one of Porter's chief biographers, in the preface to the second edition of her *Life:* "She edited the story of her life as she might have shaped one of her short stories, rejecting certain experiences which she felt should not have happened and did not really belong to her and substituting others which seemed more appropriate" (20).

However, it is not only the representation of her own past life but also that of her family and its history that show signs of considerable manipulation. When asked in an interview about the role of history in her writing, Porter did not address the issue of the *function* but instead skirted that part of the question by answering with a barrage of apparently factual information about her family history – details of which, as the editors observed in a footnote included in a later version of the interview, were largely "incorrect."[3] Obviously, personal identity and its continual construction and reconstruction are major issues in Porter's life and work. What is more, the past, as an important constituent of personal identity, has a special function for her. That is one of the principal reasons for Porter's fascination with Mexico. She perceived the past as a pervasive presence – particularly in the country's cultural heritage, which held her spellbound. To what extent this is true can be seen

[3] The full text of the editorial comment – which was not included in the original version of the interview, and which has been removed from its first online version – runs as follows: "Much of what follows is factually incorrect. But as Porter was renown [sic] for glamorizing and embellishing her past, the editors have decided to leave fake enough alone."

in several early sketches and essays. In 1922, she wrote a substantial piece entitled "Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts," which accompanied a traveling exhibition to be shown in the United States that she had helped organize. "In this country," she explains in the opening paragraph of the essay, "the past is interwoven visibly with the present, living and potent" (*Uncollected Early Prose* 140). To be sure, the past she refers to here is the ancient past – Porter was strongly attracted to the theories of Manuel Gamio and embraced his notion that "the glory of Mexico's indigenous cultures lay entirely in the precolonial past" (Hewitt de Alcántara 10).

By and large, Porter subscribed to a sort of chronological / cultural primitivism. In an early sketch on two recently discovered ancient pyramids, she concluded admiringly: "Beauty was there [in Teotihuacán], and a magnificent concept of life. . . . A superb race flourished there, and a wise one" ("Two Ancient Mexican Pyramids," *Uncollected Early Prose* 193). What she thought of as one of the most salient characteristics of modern Mexico was the continued existence in parts of the population of "a very old race, surviving and persisting in its devotion to ancient laws with a steadfastness that is anachronism in this fluctuating age" ("Outline," *Uncollected Early Prose* 187). It is due to this functional link with a past of glorious achievements that the "authentic" Mexican was able to preserve a connectedness with their own existence and the world around them that was about to be lost as a result of the advent of Modernity in Mexico and which had certainly been lost to a far greater extent in Porter's own native country. To Porter, the authentic Mexican was typical of "a people simple as nature is simple: that is to say, direct and savage, beautiful and terrible, full of harshness and love, divinely gentle, appallingly honest" ("Outline," *Uncollected Early Prose* 165). The image that Porter draws in "Xochimilco" (May 1921) is that of a perfect pastoral – both the setting and its inhabitants are remainders of the Golden Age of Aztec culture: "These . . . Indians are a splendid remnant of the Aztec race; they . . . live their lives in a voluntary detachment from the ruling race of their country. They build their own homes with maize stalks grown in their own fields. . . . They grow their own food" (*Uncollected Early Prose* 75). Living in close communion with their natural environment, the Xochimilco Indians seem to Porter like a natural extension of the world they live in "entirely removed from contact with the artificial world" (*Uncollected Early Prose* 75).

Porter's preoccupation with the past during her first visits to Mexico is not as purely scientific or aesthetic as it may seem but also, perhaps even more so, psychological – and it holds the key to the answer she never gave her interviewer. Painting a very bright and positive picture of her stay abroad in the letters to her family, describing her new environ-

ment as a big, fascinating adventure, "a continual marvel to the eye and the emotions" and adding details about "a thousand delicious things" to them (Letter of December 1920, quoted in Walsh 21), she was in reality continually trying to escape periods of depression that haunted her with frightening intensity. Significantly, very little written material survives from this time and what is preserved suggests that Porter lived through a severe personal crisis. As Walsh points out, "[t]he tattered, fragmentary notes that do survive are in such a jumbled state that their significance and precise date of composition are often a puzzle" (xv). Similarly, in a diary entry she made shortly after her arrival in Mexico, she wrote "[i]t may be five years before I write about Mexico . . . The thing is too complex and scattered and tremendous" (Unrue 76). Now, the past, the personal past as well as that of a community, has a decisive function in the formation and the maintenance of personal identity. As Erik Erikson has argued (quoted in Woodward 39), identity is characterized by "a conscious striving for continuity." To be able to tell the story of one's past – both that of one's ancestry and one's personal past – allows the subject to reify continuity and to insert itself into that continuity. From this gesture results a sense of belongingness, a feeling of being "at home" in time. Command and control of the past is – in other words – a way of strongly empowering personal identity. Because Porter felt that she did not have the right kind of past, such a past needed to be constructed: this was achieved by manipulating her biography and by giving the strong characters in her fiction a powerful past.

This becomes particularly evident in her two most important Mexican stories, "María Concepción" and "Flowering Judas." In these two narratives, Porter writes two versions of herself. In "Flowering Judas," this is Laura, an American living in Mexico and working as a go-between for an ageing revolutionary, Braggioni. Laura, namesake of Petrarca's idealized woman, his *madonna angelicata,* is outwardly a model of femininity, and well-liked or desired by everyone. Her personality, however, is extremely problematic, as Laura is incapable of any genuine commitment, devotion or, indeed, love. Deeply torn, she lives in total denial of herself and her femininity. Completely out of touch with her own existence, "not at home in the world" (*Collected Stories* 97), she considers her own fate "nothing, except as the testimony of a mental attitude" (*Collected Stories* 93). Laura has no past, the story insists. For her, there is nothing but the present and "no pleasure in remembering her life before she came here" (*Collected Stories* 93). In sharp contrast, her adversary, the corrupt and excessively egotistic Braggioni, is outwardly self-assured and powerful – all of which he owes to his own past. A "skilled revolutionist" who had "his skin punctured in honest warfare" (*Collected Stories* 91),

he now wields the power of a local potentate whom nobody dares to oppose.

Despite her protestations to the contrary, Laura admires Braggioni. He represents everything she denies herself: independence, determination, a clear vision – however flawed – of his goals in life. He stands for that other life she wishes she could lead, feeling betrayed "irreparably by the disunion between her way of living and her feeling of what life should be" (*Collected Stories* 91). "What life should be" is obviously also the dark underside – or what she perceives as such – which she wishes to live and is afraid to admit and even think. In this respect, Laura is a female version of Joseph Conrad's Marlowe – like him, she is both utterly disgusted by and yet strangely attracted to the ruthless exercise of power.

The one character who embodies this capacity of instinctively using uncivilized violence in a crucial moment instead of letting herself be paralyzed by scruples and indecision is María Concepción, the eponymous heroine of Porter's first published short story. It is the story of a Mexican woman who kills her husband's mistress, is protected by the community from being found out and persecuted by the authorities, adopts the new-born child of her dead rival and then lives again with her husband. In "María Concepción," the empowering function of the past is foregrounded even more so than in "Flowering Judas." The most powerful figure of the narrative – socially, economically and psychologically – is the American archeologist Givens, whose name stands for what he represents to the couple – the known facts, as it were, the stable reference point in their lives. Givens is not only María's husband's employer but also his patient and benevolent acting father who has saved his irresponsible head digger several times from going to jail and from being shot. Read against the background of Porter's "Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts" and her "Xochimilco" essay, Givens' function is to reconnect the past with the present. In the larger context of Porter's views, this gesture is authoritative, redemptive and empowering. In contrast to Givens, whose relationship to the past is conscious and intentional and therefore, again in Porter's eyes, remains a potentiality in many respects, María Concepción's connection with the past is instinctive and therefore immediately operational – with a direct bearing on her life. Here is how she is described at the outset of the story:

> Her straight back outlined itself strongly under her clean bright blue cotton rebozo. Instinctive serenity softened her black eyes, shaped like almonds . . . She walked with the free, natural guarded ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child . . . She was entirely contented. (*Collected Stories* 3)

Clearly, María Concepción, the "primitive woman" commands archaic instincts which provide her with a natural fitness for life. She is the exact counterpoint to Laura in "Flowering Judas" who, too, wears a blue dress but covers up her body completely and who is not pregnant – although her body suggests potential pregnancy – and so emphasizes the absence of motherhood as a fundamental lack or want:

> ... this simple girl who covers her great round breasts with thick dark cloth, and who hides her beautiful legs under a heavy skirt. She is almost thin except for the incomprehensible fullness of her breasts, like a nursing mother's. (*Collected Stories* 97)

Like Braggioni, María Concepción is empowered by the past – in her case the past of her "superb race" ("Two Ancient Mexican Pyramids," *Uncollected Early Prose* 193) – and this allows her to act on instinct and to take (cruel) initiative in the decisive moments of her life. The narrator carefully documents María Concepción's transition from instinctual notion to conscious decision and back to instinctual action:

> Now and then she would stop and look about her, trying to place herself, then go on a few steps, until she realized that she was not going towards the market. At once she came to her senses completely, recognized the thing that troubled her so terribly, was certain of what she wanted. ... The thing which had for so long squeezed her whole body into a tight dumb knot of suffering suddenly broke with shocking violence. She jerked with the involuntary violence of someone who receives a blow . . .
>
> (*Collected Stories* 13)

Instead of going to the market, as she had originally intended, María Concepción walks to the *jacal* of her rival, stabs her to death, and returns to her own hut where she confesses the murder to her husband. Later, when the community is interrogated by two mixed blood gendarmes "with Indian sympathies" (*Collected Stories* 16), she is cleared of any guilt – on the testimony of old Lupe and the other villagers who take sides with her. What saves her is an all-powerful sense of community rooted in the shared past of a generation growing up together and sharing an instinctive, old-testamentarian notion of justice. It is a simple understanding of right and wrong that does not qualify her deed as murder – as does the enlightened legal system – but as an act of just retribution and self-defense, an enactment of the "straight, undeviating purpose" (*Collected Essays* 355). As Porter explains in her "Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts," the members of such an ideal(ized) community "share ideas, intuitions and human habits; they understand each other. There is no groping for motives, no divided faith: they love their

past with that uncritical, unquestioning devotion which is beyond logic and above reason" (*Uncollected Early Prose* 170).

For Porter, Mexico is a space in which the unlived sides of her life can come to the fore. That is how texts like "María Concepción" and "Flowering Judas" can be re-read. The character of María Concepción is doubtless constructed in a gesture of true admiration, that is, in awe and veneration of human qualities that Porter felt were still present South of the border and were worthy of being preserved in the teeth of the advent of modern civilization. However, María Concepción is at least as much an attempt to reify in a literary form a desirable version of the author herself, one that has the courage to take control of her own life – even at the cost of murder. And thus Laura's symbolically overcharged nightmare at the end of "Flowering Judas" in which Eugenio calls her "Murderer" (*Collected Stories* 102) should not only be read as a result of her feelings of guilt about the prisoner's suicide. It stands at least as much for Laura's shame about her paralyzing infatuation with Braggioni and for Porter's own fascination with a figure she constructs as utterly despicable but to whose vileness she nonetheless devotes long passages of detailed and incisive description. By the same token, "Murderer" represents Porter's own sense of transgression, namely, to be so much in love with a murderess in that other story, "María Concepción," to be so thoroughly rapt by the relentlessness of her main character's "straight, undeviating purpose" (*Collected Essays* 355).

Porter's notions of personal identity are deeply rifted, torn between what she perceived to be her own fragmented identity and an essentialist, ultimately Romantic version of selfhood that she craved. That is why the author's fictional and ethnographic accounts of her Mexican experience are also a trope for her own life. They are an expression of a fundamental dissatisfaction with her own mode of existence as well as an overwhelming desire for personal wholeness and existential rootedness. However, in the end, Mexico is yet another place, which, for Porter, is not home: an interstice of a fundamental kind, a condition of existential in-between-ness, a state of interminable alienation. Crossing over into Mexico, into her "familiar country" (*Collected Essays* 355), was supposed to heal that condition – but it didn't. And so her Mexican stories are an account of how the experiment went and how the subject felt. That is the answer to the question "Why I Write About Mexico."

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