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# Going Slumming in Mexico: Rereading Primitivism in Katherine Anne Porter's *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*

Annika M. Schadewaldt

American Modernism as a movement was, at its heart, a transnational phenomenon. Yet for the longest time, it has mainly been conceptualized as a transatlantic one, focusing on American modernist writers living in European capitals. One author who stands apart from this transatlantic narrative is Katherine Anne Porter. She neither decided to stay in the United States nor considered herself part of a "lost generation" in exile.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Porter resided in Mexico four times between 1920 and 1931, primarily as a journalist. Although most scholars agree that Porter's time in Mexico can be considered one of the most crucial influences on her writing,<sup>2</sup> there is debate regarding Porter's own assessment of her experiences in Mexico. As Jeraldine Kraver observes, most scholars understand Porter's perspective on Mexico as a narrative of gradual disillusionment that can be traced through her short stories set in that country ("Laughing" 48).<sup>3</sup>

In contrast, Thomas F. Walsh has repeatedly voiced doubts regarding this narrative. Drawing on Porter's earlier sketches published in *El Heraldo*, Walsh argues in "That Deadly Female Accuracy" that the chronology on which this previous assessment relies is skewed because it is based on classifying the deeply pessimistic sketch "The Fiesta of Guadalupe" with her later stories on Mexico (641). However, this classification rests on an incorrect dating of the sketch by Porter herself in *The Collected Essays* as being from 1923 (Walsh, "From Texas" 84). Yet as the sketch was actually published on December 13, 1920, it needs to be considered not one of the later but actually the earliest of Porter's literary takes on Mexico (Walsh, "That Deadly Female Accuracy" 637). This corrected chronology of Porter's literary treatment of Mexico thus renders the scholarly assessment that these stories change from a positive perspective to a negative one as simply not true. In contrast, Porter's perspective seems to have always been marked by a much greater ambivalence than commonly acknowledged.<sup>4</sup>

Based on the previously discussed faulty chronology, some scholars have argued that Porter's early, supposedly positive portrayal of Mexico is influenced by primitivism.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, this article contends that these six short stories in *Flowering Judas* provide a remarkably early depiction of the politically problematic elements of primitivism, highlighting both the romanticized world view inherent in this movement and the lack of real change for Mexico's native population. Porter's depiction of foreign writers and artists in Mexico in "That Tree"

(1934) will be discussed first, supplemented with examples from “Hacienda” (1934), “María Concepción” (1922), and “Flowering Judas” (1930).<sup>6</sup> Then, the article will turn to Porter’s critique of primitivism in the Mexican renaissance in her short stories “The Martyr” (1923), “Flowering Judas” (1930), “Virgin Violeta” (1924), and “Hacienda” (1934).

In his monograph *Infernal Paradise*, Ronald G. Walker states that Mexico’s attractiveness to writers in the 1920s was mainly because Mexico was considered exotic and cheap. Moreover, he argues that “some of the writers, swayed by Spenglerian prophecies, were convinced that Europe was in decline and that hope for the future might be found in the study and possible emulation of cultures still ‘unspoiled’ by capitalism, science, and technology” (2). Although Porter was one of the very first Anglophone writers to go to Mexico in this period, she nevertheless seems to have had a keen eye for this very notion. As one of the most eminent Porter scholars, Darlene Harbour Unrue, points out, the author “was very much aware of the appeal Mexico had for Anglo-Americans. It offered a primitivism that was on the one hand an escape from economic and social turmoil in other parts of the world and on the other an opportunity to return to an idyllic plane of existence” (*Truth* 133-34). For example, in 1921 Porter criticizes

that choice company of folk who can learn about [foreign] peoples and countries in a couple of weeks. We have had a constant procession of these strange people: they come dashing in, gather endless notes and dash out again and three weeks later their expert, definitive opinions are published. Marvelous! (Porter qtd. in Walker 2)

While there is a certain amount of irony in the fact that these lines were written by someone who, at this point, had not spent more than a couple of months abroad herself, these remarks make clear Porter’s perspective on the topic. She astutely observes that most foreign writers visiting Mexico immediately fashioned themselves experts on all things Mexico, no matter the level of their actual knowledge of the country. Although Porter’s own expertise should probably be called dubious at best, the important point is her awareness and critical stance on this facet of expatriate life in Mexico.

This critical stance can also be seen in her 1926 review of D. H. Lawrence’s novel *The Plumed Serpent*, in which she raises similar points. She points to Lawrence as a writer whose role “in the creation and popularization of the literary image of Mexico remains singular” (Walker 26-27). Lawrence is described as having gone “to Mexico in the hope of finding there, among alien people and their mysterious cult, what he had failed to find in his own race or within himself: a center and a meaning to life,” thus highlighting both the self-centered nature of these journeys to Mexico and the exoticization of the country (Porter qtd. in Brinkmeyer 57). Porter concludes that Lawrence—and by extension other European and American writers in Mexico—“remains a stranger gazing at a mystery he cannot share, but still hopes to ravish, and his fancy dilates it to monstrous proportions” (58), revealing his inability to step out of this exoticized image of Mexico.

The image of Mexico most of these writers and artists transported to the outside world, as Porter sees it, is a product of their fantasy rooted in primitivism—a problem she highlights throughout her Mexico stories. Nowhere does this become clearer than in “That Tree.” Published in 1934, this story is the last one set in Mexico except for scattered allusions, such as in “The Leaning Tower,” “Old Mortality,” or the famous ending of “The Grave.” Therefore, “That Tree” can be seen as Porter’s conclusive remarks on her Mexican experience, given its place chronologically. In contrast, scholars have repeatedly framed “Hacienda” or “Flowering Judas” as the alleged closing remarks on her time in Mexico. This alternate timeline allows for a reading of Porter’s Mexican period as a journey from romanticizing to disillusionment due to the two stories’ gloomy mood. Strikingly, scholars’ reasons for not placing “That Tree” among Porter’s Mexico stories either go unmentioned or, as in the case of Unrue, are arguably unconvincing. Unrue understands “That Tree” as a story dramatizing tensions in early twentieth-century American society (*Truth* 132), an interpretation that leads her to the following assessment of the story’s setting:

“That Tree,” however, is a transitional story because it is only incidentally set in Mexico, and revolution is only an echo in the background. The central characters are expatriated Americans, but their dilemma has nothing to do with revolution. It is a particularly American dilemma and represents Porter’s return to native themes. (139)

While the revolution is not heavily foregrounded in the story, calling the specific historical, cultural, and national setting “incidental” seems somewhat reductive. In fact, the conflict at the core of “That Tree” functions as a portrayal and criticism of the prevailing primitivist discourse of the expatriate artistic community in Mexico.

“That Tree” tells the story of an unnamed American writer who moves to Mexico because he “had really wanted to be a cheerful bum lying under a tree in a good climate, writing poetry” (Porter 66). As the opening sentence of the story, this characterization immediately draws attention to the theme of a romanticized notion of “the idle free romantic life of a poet” that, at least according to the protagonist, can be best lived in Mexico (66). The rest of the story tells of the failed marriage of the writer, who would later “become quite an important journalist, an authority on Latin-American revolutions and a best seller,” and his first wife Miriam, “a schoolteacher” and “a nicely brought-up Middle-Western girl, who took life seriously” (66-67). Miriam does not share the protagonist’s romantic perspective on Mexico and, instead, “upset[s] most of his theories” on life (73). By dramatizing the discrepancy between the writer’s romanticized notions of writing poetry under a tree and the bleak actualities of life in Mexico as presented from Miriam’s rigidly prosaic perspective, the story utilizes the figure of Miriam as a way of drawing attention to the alleged authentic experience of the expatriates. Miriam thereby challenges what Juanita Cabello calls “‘things American male modernist’” (429), which the unnamed writer personifies—that is, the stereotypical image of the modernist writer as a young man living abroad in search for an unspoiled Edenic life outside the trappings of middle-class modern America.

This criticism is mainly introduced by pitting Miriam—who is fittingly named after the Biblical woman known for questioning male authority—against the writer’s romantic ideas. While part of Miriam’s bickering can be considered simply a satirical perspective on married life—similar to Porter’s “The Rope”—it is noteworthy that Miriam also displays a sobering perspective on what can be understood as symbols of the fundamentals of American primitivism. For instance, whereas the male writer thinks Mexican girls superior to Miriam due to their “temperament” and “instincts,” Miriam “thought [temperament] was a kind of occupational disease among artists, or a trick they practiced to make themselves interesting,” and “could make [‘instincts’] sound like the most obscene word in any language” (Porter 68, 71). Miriam thus calls into question the primitivist discourse underlying the poet’s judgments. In addition, Miriam pushes back against the poet’s romanticizing of scarcity, exposing “his Franciscan notions of holy Poverty” by calling him “a fool” for believing people would be “poor on purpose” (76). Miriam is introduced as a way to show how the poet’s perspective is irredeemably colored by his primitivism. It is then only fitting that the indigenous woman who used to live with the poet takes “to wearing native art-jewelry and doing native dances in costume,” foregrounding the artificiality of her supposed primitive naturalness and immediacy (72).

“That Tree” exposes the hypocrisy of the expatriate artists living in Mexico by highlighting the insincerity of their self-proclaimed engagement with the country and its people. The young writers are repeatedly described as lacking originality, such as the protagonist who “was always making marvelous discoveries that other people had known all along” (67), or one of his fellow journalists who cracks a joke about the backfire of a car being “another revolution” which is described as “the oldest joke since the Mexican Independence, but he was trying to look as if he had invented it” (68). None of them seem to care about what is going on around them; the revolution is solely the butt of a joke. The Mexicans are described as “these greasers” (69), and their main activity is “rolling under the tables [of a bar], studying the native customs” (78). None of the expatriates seem to be true to their alleged revolutionary colors.

While “That Tree” is the most specific and overt in its criticism, a similar perspective can be found throughout the Mexican stories. In her famous short story concluding *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, “Hacienda,” Porter fictionalizes the Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and his eventually unfinished project *iQue Viva México!*, which he began filming in 1930 (Unrue, *Understanding* 39; cf. Stout, “Something” 57). The real Eisenstein, while making the film, “spoke of the influence of a ‘supernatural consciousness’ that dictated the composition of his shots in terms of ‘primal forms,’” an idea that finds expression in one of the Russian characters in the short story, Andreyev (Walker 13). While pondering the possible reasons why one of the native extras shot his sister, Andreyev “points to both the unconsciousness and the motive, when he says, ‘Imagine a man’s friend betraying him so, and with a woman, and a sister! He was furious. He did not know what he was doing, maybe,’” thereby alluding to a possible “preordained mythological role,” considering the killer did in fact play a murderer in the movie itself (Unrue, *Truth* 28, 27). While the Russian filmmakers in the story seem to perceive their Mexican setting

in primitive terms, the short story indicates they are not interested in the fate of the natives. Although their film project is supposed, as Andreyev puts it, “to show . . . that all this really happened in the time of Díaz, and that all this,’ he tapped the pictures of the Indians, ‘has been swept away by the revolution,’” this artistic vision is mainly “the first requirement of our agreement here” (Porter 145). The filmmakers at no point seem to genuinely care about the unchanged lot of the natives, but rather see them as props. One of the film crew members even suggests that they should have filmed the murder, as this way they “could have got a close-up of the girls, really dead” (163). “Hacienda” thus introduces the reader to yet another version of a story in which Porter shows the exploitative relationship of foreign artists to Mexico during this time.

A similar theme, though less bleak and cynical in tone, can be observed in the two remaining Mexican short stories featuring foreign characters: “Flowering Judas” and “María Concepción.” While neither foreign character in these stories can be considered an artist in the narrow sense of the word, both are described as linked to artistic primitivism. Givens, the American archeologist in “María Concepción,” is linked to this sphere via his occupation as a researcher of “the buried city” (Porter 6).<sup>7</sup> Although this short story has oftentimes been read as a prime example of Porter’s own primitivism,<sup>8</sup> a careful reading of the story shows it to be much more critical than affirmative. It is certainly true that the often-quoted description of the eponymous character María Concepción draws heavily on this discourse. She is, for example, described as “walk[ing] with the free, natural, guarded ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child” (3). However, only a bit later, the story subverts this construct by describing the archeologist Givens as “fairly roar[ing] for joy at times, waving a shattered pot or a human skull above his head,” thus portraying him acting in a primitive and animal-like manner (7). In contrast to Givens, the natives see “no good use on earth” for the “small clay heads and bits of pottery and fragments of painted walls,” which they help to dig out, as they prefer making new ones to “[peddle] to foreigners for real money” (6-7). This not only undermines Givens’ perspective on the natives as backwards or even just interested in what he supposes to be their heritage, but also shows them to possess a similar materialistic perspective of the world most Modernists tried to escape. Mexico is thus portrayed not as the allegedly authentic other of an alienated American modernity, but as very much already interconnected with and similar to it. Hence, the idea of Mexico as a place where one can escape modernity appears as nothing but a fantasy.

Finally, primitivism is described in these stories as an obstacle to a clear understanding of what is going on in a given situation. Givens, for example, is described as “feel[ing] a fatherly indulgence for [the natives’] primitive childish ways,” although at this point he is utterly unaware of what is going on around him (Porter 7). Similarly, he is completely unaware that María “regard[s] Givens condescendingly,” or that she sees him as “that diverting white man who had no woman of his own to cook for him, and moreover appeared not to feel any loss of dignity in preparing his own food” (7).<sup>9</sup> In a similar vein, Laura, the American protagonist of “Flowering Judas,” sees her native students as having “smiles on their wise, innocent, clay-colored faces” and “loves their tender round hands and their charming opportunist savagery”

(93). Further emphasizing the influence primitivism has had on foreigner's perceptions of countries such as Mexico, Laura does not see her students as human, only "strange faces that will appear [before her], like clay masks with the power [of] human speech" (101). Just like Givens and the other foreign characters in Porter's Mexico stories steeped in their world view, Laura remains a stranger, a "*gringa*," and the natives "cannot understand why she is in Mexico" (91, 95). It might be exactly this skewing influence on the artists and other people coming to Mexico from the U.S. or Europe that Porter describes as the "'central idea' of 'self-delusion' and 'self-betrayal'" structuring "Flowering Judas" (qtd. in Walsh, "Braggioni's Songs" 148).<sup>10</sup>

Porter's critique does not exhaust itself in the denouncing of exoticization of Mexico by foreign artists and writers. Instead, she also finds fault with the use of Mexico's past by artists and politicians engaged in the Mexican renaissance during the revolution and thereafter. Whereas Porter's critique aimed at the expatriate community in Mexico is mainly based on their inability to perceive the native populations' suffering at all, she points out hypocrisy and a turning to romantic motifs as a symptom of decline in the Mexican renaissance. Although the two groups' respective uses of primitivist discourse and imagery are clearly not equivalent, Porter's short stories suggest some shared concerns and related problems.

Arguably, Porter's most overt criticism of the Mexican artistic avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s can be found in her short story "The Martyr" from 1923, a thinly-veiled critique of Mexico's most important painters. The artist Diego Rivera is reduced to a stand-in for Porter's perception of Mexican muralism, which she sees as betraying its original political aims. So far, the short story's reputation has suffered from its "step-child position" in Porter's scholarly reception due to its perceived lack of artistic sophistication. Yet it is a helpful entry point in understanding Porter's critique of the Mexican muralist's use of *indigenismo* (Unrue, "Diego Rivera" 411), the cultural-political movement calling for a central role of indigenous people in Latin American nation building. The short story describes "the most illustrious painter in Mexico," Rubén, who suffers from a form of painter's block after being left by his girlfriend and model Isabel. Rubén finds it subsequently impossible to finish his mural, consisting so far of "eighteen different drawings" of Isabel, and instead, spends his time overeating, eventually dying from a heart attack (Porter 33). Written in a biting satirical tone, the story portrays Rubén/Rivera as a ridiculous figure who wallows in self-pity while obviously dying from gluttony and not, as he himself claims, as "a martyr for love . . . perish[ed] in a cause worth the sacrifice" (37). Porter thus uses the character of Rubén to highlight the hypocrisy she sees in the Mexican muralists when it comes to their stated political goals and actions.

Although the story can easily be set aside as a mere snide caricature of Rivera, a closer look at the painting in the story reveals an additional layer of Porter's satirical thrust. Rubén is described as "refus[ing] even to touch the nineteenth figure of [Isabel], much less to begin the twentieth, and the mural was getting nowhere" (Porter 36), a detail that is an allusion to one of Rivera's murals called "Creation" (Unrue, "Diego Rivera" 415). This mural "is made up of one male figure and twenty female figures in a context of symbolic forms," the nineteenth being "Wisdom [which] is the uniting figure" (415). Being unable to paint the uniting nineteenth symbolic figure, Rubén is rendered as having "lost sight of his artistic commitment . . . and no

longer has an integrating vision.” Unrue goes on to write that Rubén “only pines away in the seductive charade of unrequited love, a theme that reflects Porter’s continuing fear that the artists of Mexico were more concerned with romantic love than with social problems” (416). This seems to be more plausible than Kraver’s remark that Porter’s “rejection of Diego Rivera and his work mirrors her rejection of Mexico,” considering that Porter did not in fact condemn all artists of the Mexican renaissance (“Laughing” 48). For example, “she retained her esteem for the Indian artist Xavier Guerrero” (Stout, *Katherine* 90). Instead, it appears to be the artist’s rejection of the political vision of Mexican muralism in favor of an occupation with romantic love which Porter criticizes here.

As Mary Titus points out, in the 1921 essay “The Mexican Trinity,” Porter “condemns contemporary Mexican literature for ignoring the revolution and adhering to the old themes of ‘romance and the stars, and roses and the shadowy eyes of ladies, touching no sorrow of the human heart other than the pain of unrequited love’” (“The ‘Booby Trap’” 630). In this essay, Porter highlights what she sees as the “distinctly unliberating” nature of romantic love in literature “[b]y focusing on the relationship of male artist and female subject” (630). This relationship between male artist and female subject seems to lie at the heart of exploitation more generally in Porter’s writing and thoughts, already foreshadowing possible counterrevolutionary tendencies of these supposedly emancipatory artists. This is more overtly spelled out in her unpublished sketch “The Lovely Legend,” in which “Ruben emerges as an artist who knowingly exploits a prostitute in order to achieve his artistic vision” while “in search of a Mayan-looking woman for his fresco” (Kraver, “Laughing” 55). The story shows the painter using the indigenous woman merely as a means to an end. In this way, Porter uses her short stories to criticize a perceived change in the muralists, whom she saw as retreating from their vision of “depict[ing] both the Indian’s abuses and his hopes in large paintings that were to inspire him and others to revolutionary fervor” and, instead, merely exploiting the people that become their subject matter (Unrue, “Diego Rivera” 412).<sup>11</sup>

This aspect of Porter’s critique is also highlighted in her unpublished review of *Idols Behind Altars*, a book on Mexican art written by Anita Brenner. Herein Porter points out “that none of the Mexican artists who profoundly shaped the direction of the renaissance of Indian art were true-blooded Indians” (qtd. in Brinkmeyer 60). In contrast, she believes the movement consisted of “‘mestizos and foreigners,’ almost all of whom had been educated in Europe and returned to Mexico ‘with years of training and experience, saturated with theories and methods, bent on fresh discoveries’” (60). Instead of actually giving the oppressed native population a voice, the muralists participate in silencing them, bringing with them from Europe their own brand of primitivism. The muralists look to the supposedly authentic “Indian” as the solution for their problems yet neither include them nor reflect on their actual struggles. Porter even goes so far to note that in the movement “[t]he non-Indians made the experiments and did the explaining,” thereby effectively “shout[ing] for [the Indians’] silence at the top of their lungs.” The artists, Porter continues, “talked among themselves, compared findings, defending each his own point of view, and ended, evidently, in confirming one another’s discoveries in all essentials” (qtd. in Brinkmeyer 61). It is this verdict that can be tracked throughout all of

Porter's portrayals of Mexican artists in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*—that is, in “Flowering Judas,” “Virgin Violeta,” and “Hacienda.”

The aforementioned short story, “Flowering Judas,” features Porter's second-most critical depiction of this type of Mexican artist who cares more about romantic love than the revolution and its promise of emancipating the native population, this time in the form of its protagonist Braggioni, a revolutionary leader turned artist. According to Thomas F. Walsh, Braggioni is based on two revolutionary leaders Porter had met—Samuel O. Yúdicó and Luis N. Morones (“The Making” 111, 117). These leaders merge and become the character of Braggioni who “was, in her jaundiced view, a portrait of *the* revolutionary” (120). The story opens with Braggioni, the male main character of the story, “sit[ting] heaped upon the edge of a straight-backed chair much too small for him, and sing[ing] to Laura in a furry, mournful voice” (Porter 90). Just as Rubén was once “the most illustrious painter in Mexico” (33), Braggioni used to be a leader of the revolution (91). However, from the romantic perspective of Laura, “[t]he gluttonous bulk of Braggioni has become a symbol of her many disillusion, for a revolutionist should be lean, animated by heroic faith, a vessel of abstract virtues,” something Braggioni clearly fails to be (91).

On the other hand, Braggioni sees Laura as the homonymous idealized woman of Petrarch, “his *Madonna angelicata*” (Heusser 75). Again, Porter presents the reader with a once promising political leader and artist figure who, instead of living his life as “a leader of men,” spends his time “sitting [in front of Laura's house] with a surly, waiting expression, pulling at his kinky yellow hair, thumbing the strings of his guitar, snarling a tune under his breath” (Porter 91, 90). In this, Braggioni can be seen as the matured version of the young poet Carlos, one of the main characters in Porter's short story “Virgin Violeta.” Though this story seems to have the least direct connection to the Mexican revolution, it shares a criticism of the artistic male gaze, female exploitation, and an anti-revolutionary thrust. As José E. Limón points out, the story “offers a scathing look at the world of bourgeois and racially white Mexican gentility, its empty salon talk and romantic fantasies in the midst of impoverished Mexico” (42). Here, as in other stories, Porter draws a line between the part of the Mexican population that actually suffers—lower-class and especially indigenous people—and the white, upper-class Mexicans who mainly care about the rest as subjects of their political or artistic ambitions.

In contrast to Rubén, Braggioni has not only stopped playing his part in the revolution but also hypocritically acts contrary to the revolutionary goals and, instead, uses his new position of power to take possession of what he has previously lacked. While Braggioni gives the poor “handfuls of small coins” and “promises them work,” he is shown to live a life of luxury and abundance (Porter 98). Moreover, whereas his wife “works so hard for the good of the factory girls,” she nevertheless has to “[spend] part of her leisure lying on the floor weeping because there are so many women in the world, and only one husband for her, and she never knows where nor when to look for him,” something he blames on her inability to “acknowledge the benefits of true liberty” (99). Once again, Porter portrays excessive indulgence in romantic love as not only effectively ending revolutionary activities but also resulting in more exploitation.

This criticism of the revolutionary leaders failing the Mexican—and especially the native—population culminates in “Hacienda,” “Porter’s most bitter comment on the Mexican revolution” (Unrue, *Understanding* 39). Structured around an “appearance-versus-reality theme,” Porter uses this story to draw attention to the lack of fundamental change the revolution brought to the people needing it the most, the native population of Mexico (40). In this, Porter “emphasizes not so much class conflict as the need for class conflict and the justness of the agrarian revolt” (Stout, “Something” 56). Set on an old *hacienda*, the story revolves around a Soviet film project that is supposed to show how much has changed for the native population since the revolution—yet almost nothing has changed, except the names. For example, as Porter scholar Robert Brinkmeyer underlines, “even though the revolutionary government has done away with third-class train fares, there are still three fares: Pullman, first class, and second class” (62). Similarly, instead of using the introduced technology to lighten the burden of the native peons, they are “being carried [by a train] where they wished to go, accomplishing in an hour what would otherwise have been a day’s hard journey” (Porter 136). That is, the story shows the peons to be only more efficiently moved forward instead of also experiencing real social progress (Unrue, *Truth* 86).

Instead of redistributing the land fairly, the revolutionaries are also shown to be corrupt, keeping everything for themselves. In a letter to writer and journalist Josephine Herbst sent shortly before Porter’s departure to Europe, Porter wrote a scathing assessment of the Mexican revolution and its leaders:

If the leaders had taken away the lands from the rich to give to the Indian, as they said they were doing, it would have been indeed a revolution. But when you see the Indian poorer, more desolate than ever, and every political official and every general in the country now in possession of the beautiful properties they murdered and banished the owners to get, you can hardly control yourself when they point out a few little under-nourished country schools, a few orphan asylums, a few stretches of land actually given to a village in common, but run, after all, by a ‘revolutionary’ leader. (qtd. in Stout, *Katherine* 85)

It becomes clear that, for Porter, the litmus test for the revolution was the betterment of the social and material situation of the native population. As it became more apparent that this would not be the case—or, at least, not to the extent Porter wanted to see change—she grew disillusioned with both the revolutionary leaders and the artists of the Mexican Renaissance, an art movement that, from the beginning, saw itself as tightly linked to the revolutionary cause. Instead of supporting the poverty-stricken Mexican population, the muralists and revolutionary leaders, in Porter’s perspective, retreated to a world of romance in which the “Indian” merely existed as motif and no longer as a political reality.

If read together, the six stories set in Mexico in Katherine Anne Porter’s *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* demonstrate her early critical engagement with the political consequences of primitivism. While Porter’s Mexico stories are often read as portraying a gradual

disillusionment with the Mexican revolution, resulting in her eventual departure for Europe in the early 1930s, or even a colonial perspective on Mexico, these readings are often based on an incorrect chronological arrangement of the stories. This is due to Porter's own faulty dating of her stories and on a somewhat arbitrary choice of which stories to include in a consideration of her Mexican period. However, if read in the context of the collection, subtle similarities between the stories come to the forefront which allow quite a different perspective on Porter's political commitments to emerge. Porter's depiction of both Mexican artists and revolutionary leaders is marked by growing disillusionment and corresponding intensification of her critical tone. Yet the crucial takeaway, often neglected in the scholarship, is that Porter, from the beginning, understood the Mexican revolution to be first and foremost a revolution to better the situation of its poorest inhabitants, the native population, whose social realist celebration and elevation in the art of the Mexican muralists was intended to spark revolutionary vigor in the population she saluted. It soon became clear to her, however, that the muralists were more interested in the betterment of their own situation, corresponding with a turn to romance as a central theme of their art. This eventually led to a skewed portrayal of the native population instead of an emancipatory one where they possess agency. Because of this, Porter abandoned the movement. Instead, she created biting satirical caricatures of some of its most famous representatives, such as Diego Rivera.

Porter not only chastises the domestic artists and revolutionaries as hypocritical but also rebukes the—predominately male modernist—writers and journalists who came to Mexico to find some sort of prelapsarian Eden, therefore primarily romanticizing the social realities and suffering of the native population. In their writing—and the archeological research which inspired their work—Porter recognizes that their primitivist lens does not bring them closer to the native population but, on the contrary, removes them from the native population's very real political plight. In stories like "That Tree," Porter succeeds in drawing highly ironic caricatures of the expatriate community, mocking their fantasy images of Mexico and its inhabitants while underlining their lack of concern for the actual people they met and their fate. One of Porter's characters emphasizes how most foreigners saw Mexicans and their struggles as a nuisance: "'It's these Mexicans,' he said as if it were an outrage to find them in Mexico" (139). Taken together, these stories provide an early critical depiction of primitivism, highlighting the objectification of the "Indian" in both the Mexican revolution and the Anglophone expatriate community whose romanticized picture of the "primitive native" helped to cement exploitative social realities.

## Notes

1. Porter, at one point, remarks that “as we did not have the Twenties in Mexico, nor professional exiles, so we did not have a lost generation, either. I was never in exile for a day, nor was I ever in the least lost for a moment. I got myself into some very odd corners, and some disconcerting scrapes, and quite often I wondered how in the world I managed to land where I was, and [was] sometimes doubtful as to how I was going to get out again, but I knew where I was, and what I was doing, and I knew why” (qtd. in Brinkmeyer 29). In addition, Porter notes: “Literally speaking, I have never been out of America . . . but my America has been a borderland of strange tongues and commingled races, and if they are not American, I am fearfully mistaken” (qtd. in Brinkmeyer 33).

2. See, among others, Brinkmeyer; Unrue, *Understanding*; Walsh, *Katherine*. For a recent, entirely different angle on the Mexican episode as the basis of Porter’s writing, see Lawrence.

3. Throughout her life, Porter wrote several short stories set in Mexico as well as some sketches and journalistic pieces on the country. This article will focus on those stories set in Mexico published in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* and only refer to other pieces if necessary to support a larger claim.

4. While primitivism is traditionally seen as “a racial and imperialistic ‘discourse’ according to which Western artists and thinkers idealize those non-Western peoples whom they suppose to be ‘primitive’” (Etherington xii), this article uses a broader understanding of the term as suggested by Ben Etherington that also includes non-Western artists’ responses to imperialism (xi). For an in-depth discussion of the term, see Etherington 3-7.

5. Similarly, Rob Johnson and Jeraldine Kraver (“Troubled”) both argue that Porter’s stories show a colonial perspective.

6. While most foreigners depicted in Porter’s stories set in Mexico are from the U.S., there are also other (mainly) European characters.

7. On the link between primitivism, anthropology, and archeology, see Kuper.

8. See, among others, Heusser 74; Unrue, *Truth* 21.

9. Titus, who also reads Porter’s engagement in “María Concepción” as a “critical vision of primitivism” but only focuses on the aspect of gender, points out that this adhering to ideas tied to patriarchal gender roles of this supposedly ‘primitive’ female character gives the lie to a primitivist alignment of the categories of ‘pre-modern’ and matriarchal (*The Ambivalent* 43, 45-46).

10. For an in-depth discussion of Laura as a portrayal of the colonizer’s mindset, see Dean 120-39.

11. Janis Stout raises a similar point when she suggests that Porter “was troubled by the persistence of the Indians’ consignment to an inferior status despite the vision of an equality in *mestizaje* espoused by artists and intellectuals, and she aggressively deplored the clinging to power and wealth on the part of the Spanish elite who were resistant to that vision, but she supported the aims of the revolution” (*South* 46).

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