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Katherine Anne Porter and the Problem of Critical Assessment Across Borders

Max O'hara Johnson

The prominent twentieth century short story writer, essayist, and journalist Katherine Anne Porter is known in part for the fictional and nonfictional writings she dedicated to Mexico and its culture. Sent initially to work for a magazine publisher in 1920 (Givner, "a Life" 147), she would travel to and live in Mexico frequently over the course of her life. Her work provides a foundation from which to begin a discussion about the complexities of foreign authorship; a discussion that will inevitably include the question of whether authors have the right to criticize foreign cultures. Porter was an author who tested the limits to which this issue could be engaged. She was, after all, a white woman and a U.S. citizen who held opinions on foreign authorship that can be inferred through the extent of her involvement in Mexico. These opinions surfaced most notably in one of her earlier and shorter works.

It was on November 22, 1920, that Porter wrote a scathing review of Blasco Ibañez's, *Mexico in Revolution*. The review was unusual because it focused less on the book's compositional artistry and more on the methods of research used by the author. Porter criticized, "Over café tables and on street corners he gathered together the most trivial and scandalous untruths ever put between book covers as a serious account of a nation, carefully mixed with an occasional grain of fact when its exclusion would have been too glaringly obvious" (Alvarez 30). Regardless of whether the "six whole weeks" (30) that Ibañez invested in research provided him the experience necessary to write a

book on something as monumental as the Mexican Revolution, studies have yielded evidence supporting the intuitive correlation most would make between the time spent by an author on research and the accuracy of his or her final product.

In his 2008 book, *Ethics in Journalism*, Ron Smith writes that from the perspective of an informant, the main reason that journalists make errors in reporting is that they do not spend “enough time researching the topic to make sense of the information their sources” provide (63) and Porter accuses Ibañez, in his investigative capacity, of having committed this journalistic mistake. She makes other insinuations in her review as well—namely that the quality of research Ibañez performed was sloppy and incomplete. Porter comes short, however, of attributing this to either malice or some greater character flaw; she instead blames it on the limited understanding Ibañez had of the situation, the people, and the place he was researching. Ultimately, Porter claims that from the beginning, Ibañez’ intended audience made his book unrepresentative of the culture about which he was writing—as she put it, Ibañez “deftly . . . tickles the ear of the white man who indirectly made it worth his while to write this book” (31).

Yet Porter was both racially and culturally a more integrated member of the white man’s world than Ibañez. Ibañez was raised in Spain and spoke, of course, the same language as the Mexican people, albeit with dialectal distinction. The Spanish culture, furthermore, is historically integrated with that of Mexico’s, owing, to the former’s role as colonizer. Still, if her book review is an accurate reflection of her feelings, Porter felt much differently about her relationship with Mexico than she believed Ibañez himself must have felt. As she said in a 1965 interview with Roy Newquist of *McCall’s Magazine*, “I had a true feeling for Mexico . . . Mexico was wonderful” (qtd. in Givner, “Conversations” 113–14). Porter believed her love of Mexico was unqualified and not dependent on hopes for future profit. We can assume that Porter felt there were certain people who had a right to author Mexico and its events, just as there were people who did not. More importantly she did not limit those with such rights to Mexicans or to writers of Mexican descent, as her personal writings make evident.

Porter's accusations draw attention to some fundamental questions about foreign authorship, which are evident in the assumptions reflected in her writing. The most notable of these assumptions is that it is acceptable to critically assess a foreign culture and that the amount of exposure to the culture either confirms or denies an author's right to assess it. Porter also believed that she had the authority to dictate whether an author had been exposed to a culture long enough to write about it. Yet, Porter was rarely a writer who approached the idea of Mexico with objectivity. She brought to her work a slew of presuppositions which are evidenced by the deep and thematic disenchantment that often complements her writings about the country: "If there were times when she fantasized an idyllic life in a quiet village . . . there were also times when she referred to Mexico as a terrible and depressing place" (Sout 496). Porter's ability to articulate the conflict between the expectation and reality of Mexico provides clear evidence of her ambiguous relationship with the country.

Porter's ambiguity complicates her suggestion that exposure alone endows an author with critical rights, unless we are to disregard objectivity in writing entirely. It is reasonable to claim that cultural ambiguity is something any foreign-born author must work through, but whether she chooses to acknowledge the ambiguity in her writing is up to the author. However unclear, it is an important decision and the choices authors make can impact both the written work and audience alike. If, for example, the written product fails to reveal those elements which might stand contrary to the author's assumptions about the place which she writes, the author may inadvertently promote some of the misconceptions she shares with her audience. If, on the other hand, the written product accurately depicts life and events in the foreign environment but does not address the author's own assumptions, the author runs the risk of transferring her disillusion to the audience. However, if the written product works through the author's assumptions and accurately depicts life and events in the foreign environment, then the feelings of disenchantment could be minimized and the audience's misconceptions removed. Although this approach is not a formulated guarantor of the subsequent outcome, it might allow an audience to engage the story or article more

completely, and it could reduce the likelihood that they reject the author's work.

For Porter, nonetheless, it seemed to be a question of the time spent by authors in research or among the culture that stood proportionately to the literary or journalistic quality of their work. And yet, though she lashed out against dine-and-dash critics like Blasco Ibañez, Porter herself made only infrequent visits to the country and never had the prolonged residence one might expect she would have needed to understand the culture. As Jose Limón wrote, Porter was not exactly a fixture in Mexico, and in fact spent only a fraction of her life there. Her expertise was gathered during a "relatively short stay (from 1920 until 1922) and [during] brief return trips [taken] through the 1930s" (42). Still, there is sufficient evidence that she became deeply involved in Mexico's political movement. Darlene Unrue notes that Porter "was enough of a threat to the aristocratic establishment [of Mexico] to be put on a deportation list in 1921" (120).

Although Porter might have been significantly involved in the political movement taking place in Mexico at the time of her stay, she insisted, as Unrue writes, "on the separation of art and politics" and in fact "took to task those writers who muddied the waters" (121–22). There is a sense, then, that Porter's issue with Ibañez was that she saw a political bent to his writing. We saw this possibility earlier in Porter's claim that Ibañez "tickles the ear of the white man," and the viciousness of her book review certainly suggests a deeper issue than just the criticism of shoddy research. Ultimately Porter saw Ibañez as an author writing for an audience and cause beyond the objective reality of the situation in Mexico.

In his 1998 book, *American Encounters*, Jose Limón points to the fact that Porter had a deeply personal attachment to Mexico. Porter, he writes, was "dislocated" and "always in need . . . of a stable source of identity" (40). As such, she was perhaps among several Americans who sought "escape into a romanticized Mexico to compensate for [her] own personal inadequacies" (43). This would certainly account for the strong feelings of disillusionment that we see played out in some of Porter's stories, but the disparity that she believed existed between herself and authors like Ibañez could imply that Porter was unaware of her own identity crisis. For Porter,

Mexico was fundamental to this identity and therefore, to an extent, it belonged to her. She therefore might have resented the pseudo-authoritative representation of *her* country by a writer without the same deep connection.

Limón's theory goes a long way toward explaining one of Porter's most enigmatic characteristics. As an author who dedicated tens of thousands of words to Mexico and its people, she gave very little thought, if her own writing is any indication, to the Mexicans living in her own state, Texas. But as Limón further reveals, "Porter lived in ambivalence, deep detachment, and exile from her native place. For Porter [that] place was Texas" (62). Janis Sout, as well, writes about the presence of a troubling division within Porter and goes on to claim that it is a characteristic feeling of all borderlands authors: "All such writers will speak out of a divided, dual, or multiple consciousness. They will feel themselves as belonging to two distinct identities at once" (493–94). But Limón's idea of a "deep detachment" within Porter justifies her lack of affinity for Texas and we thus come to suspect something about Porter that is troubling to say the least. Her love for Mexico might be only a love of what it brings her, of what it contributes to her identity, and not a love of its people. She might have had little reason, therefore, to give effort towards an analysis of the Mexican life within Texas. If ultimately, Texas-Mexicans played no part in establishing Porter's ambivalence towards her birthplace, she could discuss Texas without discussing its Mexican population.

So if Porter raised the question of whether one should rightfully assess a foreign culture, she potentially discredited herself as a voice that could provide the answer. Perhaps it is not even a question of "if one should assess" as much as it is a question of "did that one misrepresent?" This seems to be one of the focuses of contemporary critical discourse on the matter. *Ethics in Journalism* author Ron Smith claims that "Many errors in news stories are caused by reporters' isolation from their communities" (61). But if the reporter's closeness with a community is the litmus test by which we judge an article's credibility then it becomes less feasible to conduct foreign correspondence or, in many cases, to conduct research abroad for novels or works of nonfiction without writers being forced to transplant themselves to foreign locations for extended periods of time.

Writers that do travel abroad must still contend with the matter of either misrepresenting a culture or avoiding its misrepresentation. In their recent article, “The Method of Culture Contrast,” Cathrine Hasse and Stine Trentemoller point out that researchers, whether they are social scientists or authors, unavoidably bring multiple perspectives to their work. Research, they write, builds “on local category systems,” which they refer to as “etic categories,” but builds also on “categories belonging specifically to the national culture of the researcher,” known as “emic categories” (46). The problem, however, is that many researchers assume the value of their emic influences and therefore make them part of the “underlying . . . framework on which the research is conducted” (46). It might have been something along these lines to which Porter was accusing Ibañez of having succumbed. And yet, given the adoptive role Mexico played in the construction of her own identity, Porter herself might have succumbed to feelings that were as unfortunate as they were ironic. Virginia Whatley Smith discusses the phenomenon in her 2001 book, *Richard Wright’s Travel Writings*. Writing about the reactions to Wright’s essays on his travels in Europe, she states: “there was an underlying racist resentment too, that an African American . . . dared to challenge the integrity of one of Europe’s most fabled and ancient cultures. There was more acceptance of Wright reporting on events in Ghana in an earlier book” (120). Ironically, Wright was no more familiar with the people of Ghana than he was with those in Europe, so we can assume that the only basis for ascribing greater authority to his writings about Ghana is the similarity between the skin color of the author and the skin color of those he wrote about. To be clear, there could hardly have been a racial element to Porter’s criticism in this context—she simply would not have felt *racially* kindred to the Mexican people who were and are descended from Spanish Europeans and Native Americans or both. The issue Whatley Smith describes, however, is present in Porter’s review. The problem common to both Porter’s review and to the criticisms of Wright’s travel writing, is the belief that an individual who is perceived to be an outsider by his critic(s) has the audacity to conduct research and present his or her findings in a foreign location, and implies (in Porter’s case) or overtly states (in Wright’s case) that research is more appropriately

conducted in places and among people with whom the author is familiar. This is an unfortunate judgment because it discourages the study of cultures beyond the author's border. Also, it is ironic in Porter's case, because she spent a fair amount of her life as an outsider studying and writing about the Mexican people.

These perceptions can complicate the efforts writers have made to work through their assumptions and to carefully report on conditions in a foreign environment. As Hasse and Trentemoller point out, however, in the face of such criticism, authors can employ "the culture contrast method" (48) to keep their research critically sound and to mitigate the impact of prejudice upon their work. Even if a pure compare and contrast analysis is not utilized in the final written work, writers should take their unique cultural perspective "to be part of the research itself" rather than part of the "framework on which the research is conducted" (46). Ibañez might have successfully avoided the sting of sharp criticism had he more concertedly addressed how the reality of Mexico ran contrary to the assumptions of the Mexico he brought with him. Porter might have believed that she had the authority to dictate whether other authors were expert enough to critically assess Mexico and its culture. However, as long as authors confront the assumptions they bring to their research and make no attempt to write beyond the scope of what their research reveals, it becomes the authors themselves who finally mandate the quantity of cultural exposure necessary for critical assessment.

Perhaps Katherine Anne Porter failed to answer the ethical questions that her criticism created, but she contributed significantly to the dialogue surrounding foreign writing and research. It is a mistake to assume that Porter, as a writer, was unaware that the Ibañez review was potentially problematic and does her an injustice to assume so. M. K. Fornataro-Neil best sums up the crux of the problem in stating that, "according to Porter, language has the power to unite people as well as to alienate or separate them . . . [and] as a native English-speaking woman, the narrator is also," as Porter herself put it, a "hopeless outsider" (421). Even if she found it lamentable, Porter was not so deluded by her presence in Mexico as to remain totally oblivious to the irony of her being in a foreign country.

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