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THE FAMILIAR FOREIGN COUNTRY: READING MEXICO IN
CORMAC MCCARTHY, JACK KEROUAC, AND KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

by

Rachel Mae Ligairi

A thesis submitted to the faculty of

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE COMMITTEE APPROVAL

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As chair of the candidate's graduate committee, I have read the thesis of Rachel Mae Ligairi in its final form and have found that (1) its format, citations, and bibliographical style are consistent and acceptable and fulfill university and department style requirements; (2) its illustrative materials including figures, tables, and charts are in place; and (3) the final manuscript is satisfactory to the graduate committee and is ready for submission to the university library.

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ABSTRACT

THE FAMILIAR FOREIGN COUNTRY: READING MEXICO IN CORMAC MCCARTHY, JACK KEROUAC, AND KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

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Department of English

Master of Arts

My thesis examines the discourse of Mexico in the works of three twentieth-century American authors—Cormac McCarthy, Jack Kerouac, and Katherine Anne Porter—in order to analyze representations of Otherness in modernism and postmodernism. I seek to destabilize the dividing line between these periods as well as to show how representation in postmodernity has become more problematic due in large part to the proliferation of consumer culture. Though the Mexico that McCarthy employs in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy (*All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *Cities of the Plain*) escapes many stereotypes, his Mexico is merely a staging ground that he uses to examine postmodern questions of philosophy while deconstructing myths such as the Old West and Manifest Destiny and reflecting on the ramifications of World War II. Therefore, McCarthy elides Mexico by using its Otherness as a mirror that enables

reflection on the Self. Kerouac too is interested in using Mexico to solve U.S. problems. In *On the Road*, Kerouac's fictional counterpart, Sal Paradise, searches for the authenticity missing from middle-class American life by ultimately turning to the "authentic" Mexico. Though he is able to distinguish between simulations and reality in his own cultural context, once south of the border Sal misrecognizes what is a hyperreal Mexico for supreme authenticity. By contrast, when Katherine Anne Porter crosses the border, she is quick to identify corruption and revolutionary failure in Mexico. When pieces such as "Xochimilco" and "María Concepción" are placed alongside that of the work of Diego Rivera, a leader in the Mexican muralist movement, it becomes clear that Porter essentializes her Mexican subjects with the specific political goal in mind of furthering the revolution. Additionally, by crossing the generic lines separating fiction and non-fiction, Porter approximates what could be called a postmodern form of ethnography. Yet all of her representational strategies are tempered, especially in her last Mexican story, *Hacienda*, by an awareness that representations of Other cannot be other than flawed.

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Introduction: Representing (in) Modernism and Postmodernism

Thomas F. Walsh, in his comprehensive study of Katherine Anne Porter, notes that “among Porter’s papers is a photograph apparently of a beautiful Indian woman standing in profile by a stone wall, a rebozo over her head and around her shoulders” (83). This image is reminiscent of many lead characters in Porter’s short stories; in addition, the photograph could be said to capture a stereotypical vision of Mexico itself as seen through the eyes of its Northern neighbor: picturesque, rural, pure. But it turns out that the subject of the picture is not an indigenous Mexican—it is Katherine Anne Porter dressed as one. On the one hand, Porter’s pose can be read as typically modern. It suggests the Western ethnographer who claims to speak about Others via the knowledge she has gained from temporarily becoming one of them. That is, the partial disguise Porter wears, which at first deceives but never fully conceals, mimics the ethnographer’s self-constructed identity as one who is privy to insider knowledge without losing the outsider status that renders her capable of objective observation. Of course, the costume also shows these observations for what they usually are—dressed up versions of the ethnographer’s own neuroses, desires, and fears.

On the other hand, the photograph could be read as characteristically postmodern. The costume Porter wears makes visible the constructedness of identity, the ability to assume and abandon identity roles that aren’t tied to any fixed (modernist) essences. In this light, her *performance* as Indian/Mexican exposes the performative nature of her identity as U.S. American, Southerner, woman, etc. If Baudrillard’s concept of simulacra is applied here, the photograph calls into question the existence of its real-world referent: perhaps the “authentic” Indian is locatable only in the network of signs circulated among

various filmed Westerns. Finally, the picture reminds us that while Porter may try to speak for the Indian, she is necessarily confined to the limited arena of her own subjective experiences; her face showing through the rebozo makes clear that the stories she tells about Indians can only ultimately be about her. This last statement brings us full circle to the ethnographer who, through writing about the Other, ultimately exposes herself.

While anthropology attempts to document the cultural practices of the Other, postmodernism recognizes the impossibility of objectively doing so. Yet, in exposing the unrepresentability of the Other, the postmodern author can only represent (in a positive sense) the self—this when postmodernism arguably posits “an end to ‘the subject’” (Kellner 1). There is a tendency among contemporary critics to almost categorically define modernist encounters with and representations of the Other as intrinsically more problematic—more colonial, essentialist, and primitivizing—than their postmodern counterparts. Interestingly, there is an Enlightenment logic of progress at work here, one of linear progress. The postmodern, taken temporally as coming *after* modernism, is assumed to be better suited for negotiating problems of representation. I will interrogate this assumption by reading Jack Kerouac and Cormac McCarthy’s (transitional) postmodern uses of Mexico against that of modernist Katherine Anne Porter. I hope to show, as my discussion of the Porter photograph suggests, that contemporary readers largely see authorial encounters with Others as more or less problematic depending on whether those authors are classified as modern or postmodern. More importantly, I will argue that postmodernism does not necessarily offer a more liberating representational schema than does modernism, that in fact—as demonstrated by these three authors—

discourse has become more problematic due in large part to the proliferation of consumer culture.

Mexico: a Discursive Formation

I am less interested in this thesis in Mexico as a geographic location than in its discursive formation in the modernist/postmodernist tradition. Mauricio Tenorio Trillo nicely puts why this is: “representations of Mexico by foreigners seem to be a perfect metaphor for the idea of the West looking at ‘the Other’” (235). U.S. Americans have had varied relationships with their southern neighbor; they have exploited, explored, and enjoyed Mexico since its formation, but throughout all of this, Mexico has also symbolized the United States’ closest source of alterity, and in today’s globalized, postmodern era where the nation-state no longer reigns supreme, it is noteworthy that the U.S.-Mexican border—porous as it is—still serves as a distinct marker of Otherness in the U.S. psyche. American authors are not immune from this view. It seems that Porter, Kerouac, and McCarthy are drawn to Mexico because it is foreign but paradoxically feel entitled to write about it because it is familiar. Indeed, Porter uses this justification herself, labeling Mexico her “familiar country.” This perceived familiarity results in fiction that attempts to speak for and about the Other with less inhibition than is characteristic of much American writing. For this reason, the discourse of Mexico offers an especially fertile site for examining the representation of Otherness in modernism and postmodernism.

Modernists were drawn to Mexico (and to what José Limón has called “Greater Mexico,” including Texas and the Southwest) for several interrelated reasons. In the words of Cecil Robinson, they saw Mexico as being “closer to the essential rhythms of

life” and “free of puritanical ‘hangups’” while simultaneously offering a richer form of spirituality than was available in the United States (10–11). I would add that the Mexican Revolution also enticed moderns like Katherine Anne Porter, who were interested in socialism, to cross the border. Politics excluded, Kerouac and other Beats were drawn for similar reasons, though with the addition of easy access to drugs. I don’t know that a wide postmodern use of Mexico can be said to exist, but at least in the case of McCarthy, it is a place dominated by the attempt to escaping modernist tropes. However, as Trillo insightfully notes, any attempt to escape stereotyping representations by showing the “real” Mexico implies that there is a “real” Mexico that can be known objectively (230). The postmodern position would negate this possibility. It therefore becomes important to look closely at what replaces an essentializing use of Mexico in postmodern discourse. In Chapter One I demonstrate how Cormac McCarthy avoids this use of Mexico by sidestepping a direct representation of the country and its peoples all together. Instead, the unrepresentability of Mexican Otherness is problematically replaced by a self-reflexive gaze that allows for an introspective look at *U.S.* policies and concerns.

Modernism and Postmodernism: Transitions and Assumptions

The terms *modernism* and *postmodernism* are often contested. In fact, some argue that postmodernism is nothing more than a form of late modernism. Tobin Siebers frames the debate as follows: “In much of the debate on postmodernism, it is said that either postmodernism is continuous with modernism, in which case the whole ‘debate’ is specious, or that there is a radical rupture, a break with modernism, which is then evaluated in either positive or negative terms” (3). Although Siebers identifies two sides

to the second part of this debate, it seems that in many contemporary conversations, postmodernism is seen as overwhelmingly positive, at least where representations of the Other are concerned. In this thesis I intend to engage both strands of this debate by problematizing the dividing line between modernism and postmodernism while also arguing that representation of Otherness in the latter half of the twentieth century has become more ethically problematic, not less. I will begin by offering what seems to be a typical definition of modernism, along with major criticisms of the period. I will then track its development into postmodernism, unearthing along the way some of the problematic assumptions that have led to postmodernism's elevated status as the more liberating of the two periods.

Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman, editors of *Modernity and Identity*, offer a summation of modernism as traditionally being “that of the static and abstract model separated from the dynamic ebb and flow of reality” (1). Modernism's faith in master narratives and totalizing structures is apparent in its affinity for structuralism and its “predisposition toward homogeneity” (Siebers 32). Politically and economically speaking, the early twentieth century—modernism's usual temporal boundary—is seen as more centrally organized and more hierarchical than the latter half. The distinction between high and low culture was more pronounced, with T.S. Eliot epitomizing an ultra-elite high modernism. For the most part, the moderns had faith in depth, in meaning, and in originals preceding representations. Even a figure like Gertrude Stein, who playfully engaged in experiments with the free-floating sign, saw such experiments as nevertheless linked to deeper systematic patterns of human subconsciousness. The period also saw science and technology as offering, with perhaps the major exception of WWI, a path of

progress. Although more identity roles opened up during modernism than had existed previously, identity was still seen as coming “from a circumscribed set of roles and norms” (Kellner 141). In short, we might define modernism as universalistic, unified, and objective.

As I have indicated, modernism’s contact with and representation of the Other is often typified by the field of ethnography. This is due to both the predominance of ethnographic practice during the early twentieth century and the influential structuralist theories—mainly those of Claude Lévi-Strauss—that grew out of them. The critiques of modernist ethnography have been several and substantial. The main criticisms are worth reviewing here since they also constitute many of the problems that have been identified in modernist fiction, the problems that postmodernism apparently avoids. In his book *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian convincingly demonstrates that anthropology has long relied on time manipulation in order to legitimate its own knowledge-gaining and reporting processes. In his words, various “distancing devices” ethnographers employ result in a “*denial of coevalness*. By that I mean *a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse*” (31, original italics). This time displacement resulted in the frequent modernist use of the primitive as a site of cultural dormancy, which allowed spatial movement to become temporal as well. By visiting a “primitive” culture, the ethnographer could go back in time, so to speak, to study a people who were lower down on the developmental chain. Fabian notes that structuralism relied on a cultural relativism that allowed individual groups to experience their own notions of time. Although such relativism may seem freeing in one sense, it denies the Other the ability to communicate,

since “communication is, ultimately, about creating shared Time” (31), and it privileges the anthropologist’s time as the objective standard against which all others are judged. Fabian classifies all of this as a form of “absentee colonialism” (69), a common charge against modernist writers.

Whether exemplified by Hemingway’s trophy hunting in Africa or Willa Cather’s fascination with New Mexico, modern American authors were undoubtedly drawn to spaces they considered simultaneously degenerate and redemptive, and the writing these locales inspired has long been critiqued as the product of imperialist eyes. Modernism’s belief in unified cultures that could be coded, totalizing scientific explanations, and the fixity of identity contributed to portrayals of alterity that are indeed problematic, as did the tendency to exoticize and commodify the Other; however, if postmodernity has been able to escape modernism’s faults—and I’m not sure it has—representation has been problematized in new ways through the repositioning of the subject in this moment of late capitalism. I choose to frame my discussion in terms of Frederic Jameson’s understanding of postmodernism for a few reasons. First, because modernist writers are so often studied through a spatial-temporal lens, it is important to look at postmodern writers from the same perspective. Jameson makes such a perspective possible through a theoretical framework that reinstates history as a conceptual category in an era that is primarily concerned with language. Further, as a Marxist critic, Jameson links the economic and the cultural in ways that explain the logic of the new embedded in postmodernism, a logic that informs Kerouac’s and McCarthy’s work. An awareness of material history is equally important in considering the writings of Porter, since her project is inseparable from her own socialist/communist concerns. Finally, Jameson’s

complication of a periodic conception of modernism and postmodernism is useful in my attempt to break down the easy categorization of modern and postmodern representations of Otherness.

Marshall Berman observes that postmodernism developed in two “waves,” the first during the 1960s, around the time Kerouac was writing, and the second in the 1970s and ’80s, when McCarthy started publishing his Western novels. Berman characterizes this first wave as an American-rooted movement that “deplored the cultural orthodoxy” (43) its adherents saw modernism to be. These postmodernists began mixing genres, playing with surfaces, collapsing high and pop culture, and breaking down political hierarchies. The second wave was French-inspired and related closely to poststructuralism, focusing on what Lyotard calls “the heterogeneity of language games” (qtd. in Berman 54). The subject, more or less unified in modernism, is reconceived in postmodernism as merely a network of signs and social relationships, a decentered and fragmented construction that can choose identity(ies) and yet is never truly at home in any particular one, for “subjective identity is a myth...an overdetermined illusion” (Kellner 143). Obviously, in such a paradigm, meaning can only be subjective and—at its most extreme—representation becomes impossible. Indeed, Lash and Friedman call postmodernism “an aesthetics of the unrepresentable” (14). Representation has shifted from the modernist notion of a reproduction/reflection of objects to a process that actually *creates* the objective world, or—in Baudrillardian terms—replaces it.

Why then is postmodernism largely seen as opening up a space where representation is at least less violent, if not totally liberating? Most obviously, postmodernism is credited with the breaking down of traditional categories, including

race, gender, and even the human, thereby offering a space for uncodified Otherness. There also seems to be an assumption at work that because modernist discourse led to and/or legitimated the development of harmful political realities—such as colonialism and fascism—that future political violence can be avoided by radically rethinking discourse; however, such discourse arguably precludes an engagement with the political, or at least relegates the political to the domain of language, where, I would argue, it cannot be contained. Furthermore, if postmodernism has reverted to a Humian model of the subject, as it seems, but representation has not ceased, as it surely has not, questions arise as to who is representing and by what means. Practically speaking, the abovementioned categories haven't disappeared, but their theoretical collapse has perhaps made postmodern agendas less visible and therefore more dangerous.

Although at first glance the privileging of difference appears to provide space for the Other, in presupposing sweeping heterogeneity postmodernism collapses difference into itself and thereby closes off what has long been a source of paradoxical freedom for critical theory. From Kant's notion of the sublime as the outer limit of reason to Derrida's opening of language through *différance*, the negative has enabled self-reflection and movement for Western thought. If the subjective world in postmodernity is radically heterogeneous, then everything is different; if this is true, the correlative that nothing is the same must be also. But if nothing is the same, then can difference be said to exist? From this angle, postmodernism presents a conundrum from which the only exit appears to be the denial of Otherness in some strange sense.

However, to say this is to undoubtedly oversimplify and take postmodernism to its theoretical extreme. The larger problem, in my opinion, lies in what according to

Frederic Jameson is postmodernism's equivalence with late capitalism, including the proliferation of simulacra associated with it. In her study of modernist primitivism, Marianna Torgovnick notes, "we have become accustomed to seeing modernism and postmodernism as opposed terms marking differences in tone, attitude, and forms of economic and social life between the first and second halves of the twentieth century. Yet with regard to views of the primitive, more similarities exist than we are used to acknowledging" (9). In discussing McCarthy's nostalgic modernism in *Blood Meridian* and the reliance on simulacra in Kerouac's *On the Road*, I hope to elucidate how this could be, or further, how it could be that postmodernism has actually closed down representational space.

Cormac McCarthy: Self-Representation in a Commodified World

It may seem odd, considering my interest in the historical development of postmodernism, to consider McCarthy, Kerouac, and Porter in reverse chronological order. I do so in order to resist the dialectical reasoning so intrinsic to Western thought. It would be self-serving and overly simple to combine Porter's thesis with Kerouac's antithesis to get to a higher, postmodern synthesis in McCarthy. Instead, I am attempting to read against the grain of progress by positing that McCarthy's use of Mexico is the most ethically troubling of the three. By working backwards to Porter, I also hope to uncover aspects of postmodernism at work in modernism, though to different ends.

Some would argue that McCarthy is no postmodernist at all—a recent book on the author is entitled *The Late Modernism of Cormac McCarthy*. However, his frequent use of what Limón calls "philosophical intertexts" (194), his interrogation of Western

theories of development and civilization, and even the blurred subject positions he creates through his minimalist punctuation place him quite firmly in the domain of postmodernism in my opinion. In fact, as I argue in Chapter One, McCarthy's treatment of the Otherness Mexico provides is so characteristically postmodern that it does not catch the attention of postmodern readers or critics precisely because it is so familiar to them. Exactly how McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy work as postmodern texts can be explained by reference to several of Frederic Jameson's ideas.

In the late moment of capitalism, Jameson argues, art has become so commodified that the focus has shifted completely from the subject to the object. As I demonstrate in Chapter One, this is true for McCarthy's depictions, which function less as a portrayal of Mexican subjects than as a repackaging of Mexico as an object to be sold (figuratively and literally) to an American audience interested in interrogating its own culture and history. Put another way, McCarthy's fiction offers a "new," marketable Mexico that is differentiated from previous iterations by its appropriateness as a staging ground for postmodern American-centered concerns.

One of those concerns that McCarthy spends a good deal of time deconstructing is the myth of the American West. *All the Pretty Horses* clearly demonstrates the misguided nature of John Grady Cole and Lacy Rawlins' conceptions about Mexico, which they naively see as a *tabula rasa* still open to exploration. Yet, significantly, this novel lacks the political edge of parody. Instead, as my discussion shows, its treatment of the Western genre is better characterized by pastiche—an emptied out parody that no longer has a stable referent. Jameson would argue that pastiche is the only form possible in a time when modernist styles have become worn out, thereby rendering the whole

category of “style” inaccessible to postmodern writers. Yet, notably, McCarthy does not even write a pastiche, let alone a parody, of the Mexican side of the cowboy myth, which he addresses only tangentially as it relates to his American cowboys.

Also significant is the fact that the concerns McCarthy addresses in his Mexico, including the myth of the West, are largely those of a bygone era. As I detail in Chapter One, Manifest Destiny is one of the major themes of *Blood Meridian*, and the effects of World War II manifest themselves in the Border Trilogy. McCarthy’s choice of theme lends credence to Jameson’s argument that postmodernism is characterized by the bankruptcy of contemporary experience. He asserts that “we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience” and that if our historicist impulse relies on nostalgia, it is because perhaps we “no longer experience it [history] at all” (21, 283–84). This is because, in Jameson’s estimation, the “very triviality of everyday life in late capitalism” means that cultural formations must “project the illusion that things still happen, that events still exist, that there are still stories to tell” (*Signatures*, 87) in a moment when such narrative possibilities have been exhausted. McCarthy is able to infuse past events with a feeling of currency by staging them in a foreign land. The Self looks different when refracted through an Other. In fact, this self-reflexivity is in some ways the flip side of modernist ethnography’s “objective” stance. Like the ethnographer, McCarthy is interested in distancing himself from the object of observation; however, unlike the ethnographer, who observes the Other, McCarthy observes the Self, including his own country’s history of western expansion, colonialism, and materialism. Finally, the only way to catch a glimpse of that Self is by seeing it in the Other. Ironically then, McCarthy’s reflexivity is evidence of a deeper striving for

objectivity, for a look at the Self from the outside, even as that image fulfills postmodernism's craving for novelty.

McCarthy also uses Mexico as a staging ground for broader philosophical concerns such as the social construction of justice, the breakdown of the civilized/savage binary, and the human condition of violence. Though a specific discussion of these topics falls outside the purview of my first chapter, in it I address the way in which McCarthy renders *Blood Meridian* a “nostalgic” space where it becomes possible to address such philosophical questions. In one way, *Blood Meridian*, contained as it is within specific dates and based on “real” historical events, resists classification as nostalgia. Yet the fact that so much criticism on this book is based on finding historical corollaries to the novel leads me to think that a “whole epoch” in this case has become “the central character” (Jameson 269) of the story. Mexico becomes a painterly backdrop (with a landscape that is Other than the United States—primal and less forgiving) that is reified through a process of “image fixation *cum* historicist cravings” (287). The temporal location of this novel—so advertised throughout its pages—is perhaps less important in the end than its spatial location—which, in the true character of pastiche, is generic enough to be any old desert. Or, it could be that the spatial and temporal are collapsed in the vein of modernist ethnography. Perhaps McCarthy's fetish with concrete dates is an attempt to divert attention away from the fact that *Blood Meridian's* dehumanizing violence, carried out as it is by all races, is staged in a country that has long been relegated to the temporal backwaters of civilization. *Blood Meridian's* characters can do things in Mexico they can't do in the United States, and it is this freedom from codified notions of legality, community, and morality that allows McCarthy to radically rethink these concepts. Of

course, this freedom can only be one of nostalgia for something that never existed—a Mexico, an Otherness, that is employed for the sole purpose of furthering a postmodern project.

Jack Kerouac: Simulating Mexico

If postmodernism's economic order results in a nostalgia mode that facilitates the unscrupulous use of Otherness, it also elides Otherness through the proliferation of simulacra. According to Jean Baudrillard, postmodernism is an era of the hyperreal, the more real than real, characterized famously by Disneyland. As part of a media-saturated environment, an exchange-system of signs has multiplied to the extent that it has become disconnected from the objective world. Baudrillard offers four phases that lead up to this point: first, representation "is the reflection of a basic reality"; second, "it masks or perverts a basic reality"; third, "it masks the *absence* of a basic reality"; and fourth, "it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (173). There is an unspoken assumption in Baudrillard that while the mesmerized masses are totally caught up in simulacra, there are those (such as Baudrillard himself) who through semiology can analyze this system. Kerouac, however, never questions the simulacra that surrounds him; in fact, my second chapter demonstrates how he could be said to engage in a process of simulation himself, as is apparent in his use of Mexico, which falls into the fourth category.

In *On The Road*, the thinly-disguised Kerouac (in the character of Sal Paradise) craves the authentic and is desperate to escape the constructedness of middle-class White America. Chapter Two details the many avenues Sal turns to in his search for "IT,"

including friendship with Dean, physical movement, and entrance into minority communities. Kerouac, like a good consumer of images, sloughs off his worn-out, white-man image to don—in the logic of the new—a more fashionable Mexican one while he's living with Terry. The logic of capitalism is even apparent in the fact that Kerouac and buddies “wear-out” the east-west stretch of U.S. land, only to find a better deal of sorts in turning south. Yet, none of these attempts offer Sal what he is looking for. He ultimately cannot escape the constructedness of U.S. society until he crosses the border into Mexico.

Like the moderns, Kerouac primitivizes Mexico, but he also places it in the late capitalist system of commodified signs that bear no relation to reality. Once in Mexico, Sal declares: “Just across the street Mexico began. We looked with wonder. To our amazement, it looked exactly like Mexico” (274). I argue that this quote is interesting for two reasons. First, it seems that Sal has finally found a place that conforms to his media-informed conception of what it *should* be. Mexico, like Disneyland, is more real than real—it is “hyperreal.” Yet, paradoxically, Sal also sees Mexico as supremely authentic, even though he had been able to recognize the simulated nature of the Old West and other U.S. constructs.

There is a reversal taking place here, for Baudrillard notes that “Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real” (175). In this case though, the hyperreal becomes the standard of reality against which the constructedness of the U.S. is measured. Thus while Kerouac insightfully “reads” America in *On the Road*, he participates in the simulation of Mexico. I realize that in saying this, I'm stretching Baudrillard's definition of simulacra, which he confines to mediascapes, amusement parks, and the like. However, I feel justified in doing so since Mexico is

functioning not as a geographic space in this book but instead as a free-floating system of signs signifying freedom, sexuality, and timelessness.

As Mark Poster notes, for Baudrillard “the subject no longer provides a vantage point on reality. The privileged position has shifted to the object, specifically to the hyperreal object, the simulated object” (7). Although the object—Mexico—reigns supreme in this context, it is obviously anything but liberating when a nation of people are denied subjective status by being figured as a “simulated object.” What Sal thinks he finds in the mountains of Mexico is representational integrity, when it is nothing of the sort.

Katherine Anne Porter: Representation in the Now

At first glance, simulacra seems to be a part of Katherine Anne Porter’s Mexico as well. In her story *Hacienda*, a young girl is murdered by her brother two weeks after a very similar scene is shot by filmmakers on the estate. The simulation precedes reality and replaces it in importance, with the filmmakers lamenting the fact that they didn’t get the “real” thing on camera more than the actual death of the girl. However, there is a crucial difference between Kerouac and Porter here. *Hacienda* is the last of her Mexican stories and in it her fictional double decides to leave the hacienda—to abandon further attempts at representing the Other because she sees them as so problematic.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, Porter’s work defies easy periodization and calls into question more generally the nature of modernism. Not only does she seem to recognize the problems that simulation, and representation in general, poses, she also writes herself into her stories, which are in many ways ethnographic texts.

In fact, the type of writing she produces—(semi) autobiographical fiction—is exactly what many postmodernists have called for in anthropology. Granted, by claiming late in life that all of her stories were “biographical fact,” which they weren’t, she was perhaps trying to claim the power of authenticity by situating herself as an objective viewer. But in another way, Porter’s choice to write fiction, especially when she arrived in Mexico as a journalist, could be read as a rejection of anthropology’s traditional stance.

Further, because as a modernist Porter wrote before the moment of late capitalism—characterized by nostalgia and simulacra—or because she chose to write outside of those figurations (I’m not sure how temporally fixed they are)—she was able to essentialize in a way that didn’t necessarily lead to commodification and elision of the Other. Porter was heavily influenced by the socialist murals of Diego Rivera and, as I will show in Chapter Three, drew on them in representing Mexico’s indigenous peoples. Like Rivera’s art, Porter essentialized with a specific political goal in mind, much in the spirit of Gayatri Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism.” I draw on postcolonial theory such as Spivak’s in this chapter conscious of the fact that, considered alone, Porter—a middle-class, white American author—falls well outside its reach. However, it is her tie to Rivera and the early aims of the Mexican Muralist Renaissance that render such theory appropriate in my mind. In addition, it seems only fair to consider Porter’s direct engagement with Mexico’s postcoloniality considering that she is frequently labeled a colonialist herself.

Chapter Three also discusses how there is a way of thinking about history in modernism that is unavailable in postmodernism, when history has apparently “ended.” Walter Benjamin is an example of a thinker who theorizes history so that it escapes the

problematic paradigm of progress without denying movement all together. This is not to say that he throws out the dialectic process, which he relies on heavily, but instead that he rejects the notion of tomorrow—the deferral of revolution. Though his following statement at first sounds capitalistic, it is profoundly revolutionary, as my discussion will show: “History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now” (261). Only when history is redeemed, when *all* of the past is made present, is revolution possible. Although Porter, like many modernists, was drawn to Mexico largely due to her fascination with pre-Columbian history, I believe she tried to find this historical “now” in her writing, especially in her story “María Concepción.”

Although the main character of this story is in many ways a primitive earth goddess from the Aztec tradition, she is also a good capitalist. In portraying her as both, Porter seems to recognize in a Benjaminian way that even stories of the oppressed can be used by history’s victors, as they undoubtedly were during the Mexican Revolution: a subaltern history can also be a “document of barbarism” (256). Thus Porter does more than draw on a romantic pre-Columbian past to further her socialist goals. Her indigenous characters are not stuck in a primitive past, which would legitimate their poverty and powerlessness, but neither is that primitive past rendered less progressive than the modern moment. These characters are instead “filled by the presence of now” in that they’re simultaneously pre and postcolonial and thereby positioned for true revolution.

I find it significant that Katherine Anne Porter is frequently read as the most imperialist of the three authors I have discussed. While McCarthy and Kerouac both exemplify how problematic postmodern representations of the Other can be, Porter’s

work seems to both decenter the traditional definition of modernism and show how its representational discourse could be less problematic than what has followed. As the photograph of Porter reminds us, we are often too quick to read authors as modernist or postmodernist, even as we may be too quick in assuming that the *post* in postmodernism opens up more representational space for the Other.

Chapter One:

Cormac McCarthy's American Reflections in a Mexican Mirror

In his life and fiction, Cormac McCarthy has traced a path across the space of this continent that follows the movements of Jack Kerouac and Katherine Anne Porter. Since his "Southern" novels (*The Orchard Keeper*, *Outer Dark*, *Child of God*, and *Suttree*) he has moved west and south to the border regions of Texas and Mexico. That this journey has been literal is important, but more interesting to me is his discursive move to Mexico in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy, a move that departs from but also mirrors in significant ways the other two author's crossings. Beginning my thesis with McCarthy is important because his work is situated on familiar critical ground for contemporary scholars of American literature. Criticism of his work tends to focus on various aspects of postmodernism: the deconstruction of fixed identities, the interrogation of Western philosophy, the revision of history, and the play of power and language in his novels. Yet for all of this, James Lilley notes that "issues of race and gender in McCarthy's fiction remain largely unexplored critical terrain" (7). More specific to my topic is the fact that most scholars fail to comment on McCarthy's use of Mexico as a discursive formation. If they address the physical and temporal setting of his "Mexican" fiction at all, they do so literally, as in the work of John Emil Sepich ("Notes on *Blood Meridian*"), Dana Phillips, and John Wegner, or in such an abstract way that the geography of these novels is barely discernable; Peter Josyph has gone so far as to describe *Blood Meridian* as "an epic of that country called McCarthy" (180). What is seemingly a critical oversight could more correctly be post-postmodern fatigue with reading texts through the lenses of gender, class, and race. However, equally arguable is that what McCarthy is doing with Mexico is

so *familiar* to postmodern readers that it simply doesn't register with them as a topic worthy of attention, or even as a topic at all.

There are two notable exceptions to this inattention, and both come to seemingly opposite conclusions about the role of Mexico in McCarthy's fiction. José Limón argues that the portrayal of Mexico, Mexicans, and Mexican-Americans in *All the Pretty Horses* results in a "radical revision of the hegemonic western genre and all that it ideologically and materially entails" (204), while Daniel Cooper Alarcón responds that McCarthy "has done a wonderful job of appearing to tell a different Mexican story, when in fact he has retold a very familiar one," replete with standard literary tropes about Mexico (149). I feel that both critics are right, though their characterizations of McCarthy's work do not fully capture the function of Mexico in his novels, which is surprisingly illuminated by the way that Kwame Anthony Appiah has defined the "neotraditional" genre in African art. This genre is distinctive because it draws on precolonial aesthetics but is "produced for the West" (346). McCarthy's fiction, despite the presence of cultural markers such as untranslated Spanish, which like a "traditional" African aesthetic might seem to signify Otherness, is also produced for the West. In fact, I would argue that McCarthy uses Mexico and the Otherness that it provides as a mirror in which he can examine the American psyche and soul. In so doing, however, McCarthy elides Mexico, using it as merely a staging ground for a narrative that is not only written for Americans but ultimately (and almost exclusively) about them.

In demonstrating my point, I choose to refer mainly to *Blood Meridian* (1985) and *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) for several reasons. The latter, a best-seller and a deceptively conventional novel, does not alone give a fair representation of McCarthy's work, which

is more often characterized by the striking violence in the less popular *Blood Meridian*. Also, many, including Edwin T. Arnold, have pointed out the intertextuality at play between the two novels, especially between the “kid” and John Grady Cole. Arnold sees *Blood Meridian* as a “prologue” to the later novel and each as offering “two opposing views of human experience” or “the same narrative elements considered from different perspectives” (18). Appropriately considering McCarthy’s painterly style, Arnold’s choice of the word *perspective* suggests an optical measurement: *Blood Meridian* contains a long, sweeping shot of humanity, while the *All the Pretty Horses* focuses on the close-up of an individual. Either way, the setting (Mexico) is either blurred or blocked from sight.

For the most part, I limit my discussion to the first installment of the Border Trilogy, *All the Pretty Horses*. This is primarily for reasons of scope, a move that may seem unfair at first glance considering that McCarthy extends and seemingly complicates his use of Mexico in the novels that follow. However, I feel justified in doing so for several reasons. First, the Border Trilogy—despite its lengthy second novel starring Billy Parham—is fundamentally a story about John Grady Cole. Even in *The Crossing*, Boyd serves as a type of John Grady Cole, a likeness Billy comments on in the third novel (“More and more you remind me of Boyd”) (146). Cole is a cowboy who tends to fall in love with the fleeting and impossible, whether that be a quickly disappearing way of life or an unobtainable woman. Both Alejandra (from *All the Pretty Horses*) and Magdalena (from *Cities of the Plain*) are unobtainable for reasons of class, though they are positioned on opposite sides of the economic spectrum. *Cities of the Plain* serves as a magnification, not an alteration, of the subversion of the cowboy myth already embedded

in *All the Pretty Horses*, an argument also borne out by the fact that while in the third novel Cole literally becomes the professional cowboy he wanted to be at the beginning of the series, the outcome of the final novel is fundamentally the same as the first. Cole's way of life is always on the cusp of extinction, his romanticism still always results in violence of some kind, and Mexico still serves as a location where McCarthy can address philosophical concerns and deconstruct myths such as the West. In *Cities of the Plain*, Mr. Johnson comes to the conclusion that the violent history of the West had "nothing to do with the country at all," that the types of people who inhabited the land would have "been the same it dont matter where they might of wound up" (185). Though put more straightforwardly and succinctly than any single statement in previous novels, this declaration captures one of the main deconstructive moves that McCarthy has already made in *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*. And, as in those two novels, it is a statement enabled by reflection on Mexico, specifically a fatal bar fight Johnson witnessed in Juárez. The violence that is still common south of the border in El Paso's twin city offers a contemporary segue into the historical violence of the Old West—a distinctly American myth, despite its setting in the border lands.

Setting, though seemingly a central element in McCarthy's fiction, functions in more of a philosophical than geographic way in his novels. This is especially true for *Blood Meridian*. For all of the description of landscape in this book, there is little that identifies the backdrop of this narrative as Mexico. The desert is described as "immense" and "without feature," while its cliffs constitute the "rim of the known world" (56, 47, 138). Drawing on the theories of Shaviro and Deleuze, Brian Evenson convincingly argues that this type of landscape should be characterized as "smooth space...amoral or

ethical open ground” (42). Though Evenson attributes the creation of “smooth space” to the violence Glanton’s gang enacts, which enables their unrestricted movement across the country, I read it as a precondition—not just a result—of the novel’s violence. This is true literally in that this motley crew could not make its living scalphunting in the United States, where institutions and infrastructure would prohibit it. Indeed, when Glanton temporarily crosses the border into Presidio, the text makes clear that he is now in danger of being arrested, as are Toadvine and the kid in California.

As I will discuss later in this chapter, Mexico not only provides a setting for wanton violence but also a location where McCarthy can explore the ramifications of World War II and interrogate notions of Manifest Destiny and Western philosophy, though a discussion of the latter falls outside the domain of this chapter. In order to do this, I argue he uses what Appiah has termed a “space-clearing gesture” (348) that is typical of postmodernism. Appiah, in the tradition of Frederic Jameson, sees late capitalism and the commodification of art as characteristic of the postmodern moment. The space-clearing gesture then is a way of making room for and increasing the recognition of a new product in the marketplace by “the construction and the marking of differences” from other products (342).

At first it may seem counterintuitive to argue that McCarthy is *constructing* difference in *Blood Meridian*, a novel that so clearly levels racial difference (it is made clear more than once that whites are not the only ones with bloody hands in this epic). In fact, McCarthy’s construction of difference doesn’t become clear until he is placed in the tradition of other twentieth-century writers who have used Mexico in their fiction. Aside from the stereotypical role of Mexico as a haven for criminals running from U.S. law, the

country has also been used by American (and British) writers in the “Infernal Paradise” tradition. Alarcón summarizes this tradition as a portrayal of Mexico as a source of exoticism and death, a place where antiquity and modernity meet, and a resource for Americans seeking renewed spirituality (143). While Kerouac and Porter easily fall into this tradition (though I will argue the former more problematically so than the latter), McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian* stays firmly outside it. Mexicans and Indians are no more exotic than Glanton’s unlikely group. Neither is death a source of mystery or fascination, as the murders become increasingly monotonous over the span of 300 plus pages. Though Glanton’s men encounter traces of antiquity—which the judge records and promptly destroys—they themselves are the ones described as “men of another time” (138). As for the last aspect of the Infernal Paradise tradition, one of the text’s mantras is that “there is no God in Mexico” (34), or at least not one that can compare to the cosmic nature of the landscape. Thus, McCarthy has cleared a space by differentiating the discursive formation that is *his* Mexico from the crowded marketplace of Mexicos for sale in other literature. And in McCarthy’s Mexico, neither the people nor the land distract the reader from considering larger postmodern questions (and therefore his novels sell well among scholars interested in postmodernism). Mexico becomes a discursive *tabula rasa*, that white space on a map that *All the Pretty Horses* self-consciously critiques.

At the beginning of John Grady Cole and Lacy Rawlins’ southward journey, they buy a map that shows “roads and rivers and towns on the American side...as far south as the Rio Grande and beyond that all was white.” As Cole and Rawlins ride through Mexico they note that there is “nothing in the country at all” and that this undefined land expands seemingly forever around them (59, 89). They are of course wrong. When the

two boys initially look toward Mexico, they see a horizon in the sense that Myra Jehlen has defined it: “A horizon marks as far as the eye can transcend; it is a frontier and refers outward, implying expansion” (235). However, in reality, every square foot of Mexico that they pass through is already owned by someone, and before the end of the novel the line dividing the two countries has become a border, “a boundary, thus also an outermost line, but one referring inward...mark[ing] the limit of even the farthest sight” (235). This shift from horizon to boundary, from perceived lawlessness to the confines of prison and tradition, constitutes part of McCarthy’s critique of the cowboy myth.

However, despite this level of self-consciousness and as with the postmodern projects in *Blood Meridian*, the cultural work of *All the Pretty Horses* still depends on a Mexico whose primary function is to reflect and magnify its northern neighbor, even as it problematizes that action. Consider the similarities between the spread John Grady Cole leaves in Texas and the hacienda he finds his way to in Mexico. Both have been owned by generations of the same family, both have been affected by industrialization (as evidenced by the encroaching oil rigs in Texas and the Cessna kept at La Purísima), and both have seen better days (the Cole ranch hasn’t been profitable for 20 years and we know from Alfonsa that at least the hacienda’s gardens were better tended during the revolutionary days) (234.) A parallel exists to some extent with the novel’s only other major locale, the prison at Saltillo, where Cole learns to deal in violence much as his father and ancestors did in war.

McCarthy’s lens does not linger long on the faces and lives of the impoverished Mexicans Cole occasionally meets. The same could be said to some extent for the Americans he runs across north of the border. However, it is significant that Cole’s time

in the United States is bookended by important encounters with two men despite the brevity of his interactions with each of them. In just a few pages and in even fewer words, McCarthy gives a depth to Cole's relationship with his compulsive gambler of a father that explains the son's disconnection from his parents and his larger unease with being disconnected from his family's land. In similar short form, McCarthy establishes the judge as the novel's final witness—a legal authority and priest wrapped up in one—who is able to absolve Cole's legal and spiritual guilt to some degree. Therefore, cursory as McCarthy's treatments of American characters may seem, they are treatments infused with an emotional substance such that most, if not all, of Cole's encounters of a similar length with Mexican characters lack. Perhaps this is because such characters (i.e. Alfonsa, the captain, and Pérez) are at the core of questions concerning history and relativity that the novel seems able to seriously confront only *after* Cole has traveled south. In all, the Mexico in *Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses* seems to play the role of the Other upon which Jonathan Friedman and Scott Lash suggest “we are narcissistically dependent on” in postmodernism “in order to become ourselves” (7). In what follows I will outline the dimensions of that U.S. self as it appears from a “Mexican” vantage point.

Though, as I have just finished noting, McCarthy's use of Mexico is basically postmodern, it flirts with a modernist ethnographic impulse. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo nicely phrases what is now a commonly held opinion about his field specifically and issues of representation generally: “social analysts can rarely, if ever, become detached observers. There is no Archimedean point from which to remove oneself from the mutual conditioning of social relations and human knowledge” (169). According to

Rosaldo's statement, socially concerned postmodern authors are confined to a subject position mediated by their culture and its archive of knowledge, and that position will necessarily color any representations of both Otherness and Self in which those authors engage. Furthermore, postmodern authors must grapple with poststructural problems of language, where their attempts to critique their own discourse communities are hindered by the fact that those communities are already always constituted by language encoded with hierarchical power systems.

However, McCarthy seems to be trying to sidestep some of these representational and linguistic limitations by distancing himself from his subject in using Mexico to talk about the United States, much as the modernist ethnographer used distancing narrative techniques to hide traces of the personal in accounts of Other cultures. In these novels, Mexico provides the same degree of objectivity as does a mirror: it tells the "truth" about the face it reflects, though not a truth that passes judgment from an outside vantage point. Instead, it makes visible—and here's a good explanation for why McCarthy's prose is so optical—the truth already inherent in the face itself, a "truth" that even then is subject to (mis)interpretation by its beholder.

One of the most obvious arguments against my identification of the United States as the primary audience and subject matter of these novels is their abundance of unitalicized, untranslated Spanish (especially in *All the Pretty Horses*). At first glance, McCarthy seems to be writing against the tradition of someone like Sandra Cisneros, whose Spanish words and phrases, followed as they are by English equivalents, serve to include rather than alienate a monolingual Anglo audience. However, on closer inspection it becomes clear that the non-Spanish speaker doesn't miss a lot in *All the*

Pretty Horses. The majority of the conversations Cole holds in Spanish are with those from whom he orders food or with passersby he encounters on the road—significantly, they're all of a lower class than he, reflecting the language exchanges typical of the western United States.

He also speaks Spanish with Luisa, Arturo, and Abuela, and he is emotionally close to this group; indeed, the novel ends with Abuela's burial and a tribute to this woman, who essentially raised both Cole and his mother. However, the tension that arises when motherly love is, in crass terms, purchased by fifty years of employment is never far from the surface of this novel. When Pérez accuses Cole of learning his Spanish from "servants," Cole is quick to correct him with "We didnt have no servants. We had people worked on the place" (191). However, Cole cannot completely deny the class divide separating linguistic communities. Those who speak Spanish are they who, like Luisa, serve their white employers dinner rather than having the luxury to talk about ownership of a ranch whose economic weakness is evidenced by the fact that "There hasnt been a white person worked here since before the war" (15). All of the important conversations Cole has with people who matter to him (Don Héctor, Dueña Alfonsa, Alejandra) are in English—spoken with an "english accent" (133) or as if "from schoolbooks" (123). Language then becomes less of a cultural marker than a political statement. Those who have the money and education to speak English do so.

Cole's experience at Saltillo shows that entrance into language communities must also be earned in other ways. Soon after he finishes giving Rawlins a lesson in Spanish prison lingo, Emilio says to Cole, "You dont speak the language....Maybe in a year here you might understand" (188). It is not that Cole must learn vocabulary or pronunciation;

instead, he lacks knowledge of the grammar of prison life as it is constituted through language. Though I generally don't subscribe to Limón's characterization of the function of Spanish in *All the Pretty Horses*, I think he is correct in asserting that McCarthy refuses to italicize or translate the novel's Spanish because he is making the argument that bilingualism should be the linguistic norm in the United States (204). Once again, instead of Mexico being represented as a thing in and of itself, its Otherness is drawn upon in order to bring cultural and political tensions in the United States into relief.

One of the main American myths that McCarthy uses Mexico to interrogate in *All the Pretty Horses* is that of the cowboy. Robert Jarrett sums up the now common interpretation of the novel as a postmodern revisionary western as follows: the novel is a "serious parod[y] of the west," one that "revise[s] the meaning of the cowboy and the nature of the escape he and the frontier seem to offer to the present" (97), though I would add that *All the Pretty Horses* (and to a much greater degree *Blood Meridian*) revise the meaning of the cowboy's escape to the frontier as enacted in the *past* as well. The responses are telling that Cole and Rawlins give when questioned about why they are in Mexico. Early on, Cole jokes that he is running from the law (34); Rawlins too perceives himself and John Grady as "desperados" (55). These conceptions are clearly informed by the Hollywood Western, and although they are answers given in jest, it is significant that this playful language masks the fact that no practical reason exists for their journey. Though Cole may not always be able to work on his family ranch, jobs as a hired hand are available elsewhere in Texas (for four times the pay), as Rawlins states later in the novel. The real reason, unspeakable as it is to boys who want to be taken seriously, is that they yearn to embody the nostalgic role of the cowboy. Rawlins—in some of the few

Spanish words he speaks—declares “somos vaqueros” (164). But this nostalgia is twice removed. Rawlins often wonders what people back home would think of the image he and John project in Mexico (51), and Cole, though he loves riding the stallion at La Purísima, “in truth loved for her [Alejandra] to see him riding it” (127). The image of the cowboy and the viewer(s) of that image now dominate any prior “cowboy” referent; the sign has been emptied out. Perhaps rather than characterizing this novel as a “serious parody,” therefore, it would be more correct to label it a pastiche of the Western genre.

However, deconstructive as the novel is of the cowboy figure, the Mexican side of the Western myth remains largely in tact in *All the Pretty Horses*. When Don Héctor asks what brings Cole to Mexico, he answers “I just wanted to see the country, I reckon” (114). The slippage between Cole’s use of the word, which likely refers to *land*, and Don Héctor’s possible understanding of it as *nation-state* points to the obfuscation of “country” throughout the novel; the ways in which Mexico is seen or not seen is up for debate. Though I agree that *All the Pretty Horses* is a revisionary western, the critics who have argued this point haven’t focused on McCarthy’s Mexican portrayals and as a result haven’t noticed that the label “revisionary” perhaps extends no farther than to the novel’s American characters. In order to test this theory, I must do what hasn’t been done—catalogue the Mexican characters in *All the Pretty Horses*. Though my list may not be exhaustive, any characters who might be missing are of even less significance to the story than the following:

- Girl in Reforma who sells the boys Sidrón (51)
- Family who lives 30 miles from the border and has lost touch with migrant family members. They feed the boys and offer them a place to sleep (52–53)
- Zacateros who look “wild and strange as the country they were in” (62)
- Wax-makers who want to buy Blevins (76)
- Mexican rangers who arrest the boys (142)
- The captain who interrogates the boys in jail (162–69)

- Orlando, the illiterate elderly man incarcerated with the boys (170)
- Girls who give the boys cigarettes before they enter prison (172)
- Vendors outside of Saltillo (178)
- The men in prison: “anonymous eyes” (190)
- The cuchillero John Grady Cole kills (199–201)
- Cheery farm workers who offer Cole “good will” (219)
- Schoolchildren in uniform, women washing, and street vendors (220)
- Field workers who “say how good the day was” (221)
- “Hombres del país” who take the captain (281)

The list excludes those who live at La Purísima, for everyone there (even the hired help) is portrayed as barely culturally distinct from the Americans. The very fact that Dueña Alfonsa talks so often about her cultural roots and traditions suggests that they are not readily apparent. The text also hints that Don Héctor’s rage at Alfonsa’s indiscretion is more irrational or old-fashioned than culturally indicative. Perhaps all of this is a result of the culture-smoothing globalization that began after WWII, or maybe it has more to do with Rosaldo’s observation that “one achieves full citizenship in the nation-state by becoming a cultural blank slate” (209). Whatever the reason, the inhabitants of La Purísima are in a different category than those characters featured in the list. This is also true of the captain who questions Cole and Rawlins in jail and the prison strongman Emilio Pérez. McCarthy uses the captain to explore notions of truth telling and, as I mentioned earlier, he uses Pérez to interrogate the linguistic and economic divide in the United States. Therefore, both of these characters, in reflecting McCarthy’s philosophical and social concerns, get eclipsed themselves to some degree. The rest of the novel’s Mexican characters embody a wide range of Mexican stereotypes: the woman who serves, the remnants of a migrant family, the very poor, the very corrupt, the illiterate, the girls easily won over by *gringos*, the violent thug, the humble but happy workers, the quaint townspeople, and the simple men of the country. For the most part, these Mexicans are just as typecast as the “cowboys,” but with a difference. We only get

surface glimpses of these characters, never spending more than a day or two with them and often no longer than a few hours or minutes. As a result, they aren't humanized, nor are their roles deconstructed. Perhaps Mexico is best likened to the tapestry that hangs in Dueña Alfonsa's parlor, featuring "a meeting in some vanished landscape between two horsemen on a road" (227). It remains the backdrop against which McCarthy works out the American side of the Western/cowboy equation through Lacy Rawlins and John Grady Cole.

The cowboy myth is not the only one that McCarthy deconstructs in his Mexican novels though, as a return to *Blood Meridian* shows. This novel is set during the aftermath of the Mexican-American War, and virtually all critics agree that it critiques and deconstructs the U.S. notion of Manifest Destiny, or imperialism more generally. Captain White serves as a spokesperson for the doctrine of American expansionism ("we are to be the instruments of liberation in a dark and troubled land") (34), but behind this rhetoric, and legitimated by it, is Glanton's gang, who kills anyone with hair dark enough to pass for Indian, Mexicans included, for seemingly no purpose at all. Much criticism has focused on locating the novel's historical referents. (A scalphunter named Glanton did exist, as did someone nicknamed the judge.) However, the importance of the "actual" history behind the novel is contested. Tim Parrish argues that the book "would lose much of its power if it were not a history as well" (34), while Dana Phillips sees the novel as commenting on both the mid-nineteenth century and the mid-1980s, when it was written, and constituting a "rejection of history as a meaningful category" (39). I think this confusion over the role of history in the novel can be explained by recourse to Jameson's notion of postmodern nostalgia, which serves as a mode of expression in a time when

“we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience” (21). The historical referent (of which Mexico is a part) is important insofar as it allows McCarthy a setting other than the present-day United States to reflect on U.S. actions and policies.

Evidence of this turn to Mexico to reflect on U.S. policies can be seen in the way in which McCarthy uses the Mexican Revolution in the Border Trilogy to indirectly comment on World War II. At first, these novels seem surprisingly spare in their references to the “Great War” (which is never actually mentioned by name). If it weren’t for some oblique comments from Cole’s father in *All the Pretty Horses* (25), Billy’s repeated attempts to enlist in the army at the end of *The Crossing*, and his lamentation that “The war changed everything” (333) in *Cities of the Plain*, readers skimming over dates in the Border Trilogy might easily miss the fact that its novels span the years during which the United States fought the war that came to define it as a superpower (and a neocolonial one at that). However, by turning to the many comments on the Mexican Revolution in these novels, it becomes clear that a discussion of WWII is not actually absent from these texts, it is merely refracted through a Mexican lens.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy offers a fairly lengthy explanation of the Mexican Revolution as seen through the eyes of Dueña Alfonso (230–38), yet for all the stories about the revolution recited in *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plain*, these later novels offer little in the way of context from that era of Mexican history. Alfonso’s memories do not fill this contextual gap, coming as they do from a political elite rather than a working-class soldier. In the last two novels of the Border Trilogy, the class and land struggle at the heart of the revolution are mentioned only once, in a conversation

Billy has with Quijada about Boyd. Quijada asks Billy who he thinks will “prevail”: “the wealth and power of Mr Hearst” or “the campesinos in their rags,” to which Billy replies that he doesn’t know (*The Crossing* 384). It is even an American (Boyd) who takes center stage as a folk hero of sorts, immortalized through the corrido of the güero, though whether he preceded the corrido or merely bears resemblance to its protagonist is unclear.

Significantly, the one revolutionary scene that does offer at least some strategic details, if not motivations for fighting, features a German villain. Billy learns that the blind man he meets shortly after Boyd is shot lost his eyes during the revolution to a “German Huertista named Wirtz who was a captain in the federal army.” The (soon to be) blind man was one of “the captured rebels [who] stood in the street chained together with fencewire” (*The Crossing* 276), and the captain later sucks the eyeballs out of his head. These two details—a German performing a horrendous (and highly symbolic) act and (concentration camp–like) wire fences used to constrain prisoners—suggest that McCarthy’s discussion of the Mexican Revolution is actually a concern with World War II. Looking back to *All the Pretty Horses*, it becomes clear that McCarthy is making a similar move when Alfonsa tells John Grady Cole about Gustavo Madero’s eyes (one good, one artificial) being “pried out” by an angry mob (237) right before she relates the rumor that the Madero brothers “were of jewish extraction” and her belief that theirs was at least “a jewish destiny. A latterday diaspora” (238). Together, these two scenes portray the German aggressor and the Jewish victim caught in similar acts of violence. Even the mix of rebels in the story from *The Crossing* is odd. They are “men of many nations. American and English and German” (276). In other words, they are men from three of the countries most embroiled in the European theater of the second world war.

The main feature of nearly every other story about the Mexican Revolution in these novels is meaningless violence. Men are shown being shot against walls for no good reason, while their blood runs into the dirt and female relatives watch or pray in futility. Most characters who speak of the revolution come to a conclusion similar to Travis': "You could see that the revolution hadn't done them no good" (*Cities of the Plain* 90). The only thing war scars are good for, as we find out when Billy nearly gets killed by a drunk in a bar, is blustering, empty boasting (*The Crossing* 363). As might be expected from McCarthy, violence is portrayed as a condition of human nature with only a tangential and largely unjustified relationship with political goals.

There is a problematic way in which—despite McCarthy's gruesome depictions—the violence in his novels remain at a remove for its twentieth (or twenty-first) century American readers and therefore works to interrogate myth rather than evoke strong emotions. This is especially true of *Blood Meridian*. After 238 pages of the stuff I was suddenly caught of guard by a description of "A young Mexican girl [who] had been abducted. Parts of her clothes were found torn and bloodied under the north wall, over which she could only have been thrown. In the desert were drag marks. A shoe. The father of the child knelt clutching a bloodstained rag to his chest and none could persuade him to rise and none to leave" (239). This rendering of all horrible renderings thus far stuck out to me because it conjured up images of the 320 women raped, murdered, and dragged through the desert outside of Ciudad Juárez since 1993 by killer or killers anonymous and unaccountable. I do not mention these murders in an attempt to argue that McCarthy was referencing them in *All the Pretty Horses*—after all, the novel was published in 1992. Instead, the interruption of the "present" into the narrative, which

exploded the analytical readerly perception I had otherwise maintained and called into question the ethics of the distancing and Othering practice the novel seems to rely on. The reason I finished reading *Blood Meridian* at all was in large part because of the beauty of its language, no matter what that language depicted; indeed, it was “the glossy qualities of the image” of the past (Jameson 19) that made me not look away. As in *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy’s tight shot on the constant movement of *Blood Meridian*’s characters means that their surroundings, including their victims, often get blurred and Mexico becomes a place where a reader can safely and abstractly consider the political domination of the United States over Mexico without having to think of NAFTA, *maquiladoras*, immigration policy, or dead bodies decaying in a desert.

Similarly, while the human cost of the Mexican Revolution is seemingly highlighted in *The Crossing* and *Cities of the Plains*, portrayals of Mexican suffering there actually serve to highlight the hospitality of Mexican culture in contrast to the growing consumerism of the United States. After Travis laments the futility of the revolution’s violence, he is quick to note that despite their familial losses, Mexicans have not lost their ability to give to strangers. Billy too encounters such hospitality frequently along his journeys. At least twice he attempts to pay for food he is given by Mexicans and he is twice turned down (*The Crossing* 218, 267), presumably because inviting someone to “eat with little ceremony” is “the custom of the country” (*The Crossing* 92). By contrast, when in the United States, John Grady Cole and Billy Parham are always forced to either purchase food or go hungry. And herein lies one of McCarthy’s central critiques of post–World War II America. It has gone the way of commodification, while Mexico has remained untouched by postwar affluence and its alienating effects, reflecting

the community of cowboys on Mac's ranch, who offer an alternative to the mainstream U.S. lifestyle.

At the heart of the Border Trilogy, almost exactly half way through its middle installment, McCarthy tells a story within a story that perhaps best sums up his use of Otherness. A lone keeper of an adobe church tells Billy of a man who lives out the end of his years in the shadow of the dome of a cathedral that is ready to fall. This man comes to believe "That for God there could be no witness. Nothing against which He terminated. Nothing by way of which his being could be announced to Him. Nothing to stand apart from and to say I am this and that is other" (*The Crossing* 154). However, the narrator of the story tells Billy that "God needs no witness....The truth is rather that if there were no God then there could be no witness for there could be no identity to the world but only each man's opinion of it" (158). The problem is a circular one: God cannot create a witness, yet the existence of God is the very thing that makes that witness inevitable. What in the postmodern moment of radical subjectivity (characterized by "each man's opinion") makes witnessing possible then? If witnessing is the act of differentiating Self from the Other, then that act must now take place from a narrative position that has been stripped of its omniscient ground. Therefore, the postmodern use of Otherness—including McCarthy's use of Mexico—necessarily results in not so much a delineation of boundaries between Self and Other as a reflection of the Self in the Other.

Perhaps this is why, though the author is dead in postmodernism, the anonymous character in the Border Trilogy's epilogue reminds Billy that "those stories which speak to us with the greatest resonance have a way of turning upon the teller and erasing him and his motive from all memory. So the question of who is telling the story is very

consiguiente” (*Cities of the Plain* 277). As scholars of McCarthy, teller of immensely resonating stories, we too must keep his motives in mind, including the reasons propelling him to use Mexico as a place to tell stories about the United States. For McCarthy’s choice to move to Mexico is less about attempting a better understanding of the Other than it is about using that Other as a mirror in which U.S. concerns can be examined from a fresh new angle.

Chapter Two:

Authenticity and Simulacra in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*

Critics have been more ambivalent about the writing of Jack Kerouac than that of Cormac McCarthy. Kerouac's work has been read as both revolutionary social critique and neocolonial literature—that is, when Kerouac's work is closely read at all. More often, critics are fascinated with Kerouac's life itself and with the Beat Generation. While I too am interested in this generation—or, more precisely, Kerouac's location in history—it is because Kerouac serves as a temporal and intellectual link between McCarthy's and Porter's use of Otherness in the Mexican context. This link only becomes clear though through a close reading of Kerouac's seminal work, *On the Road*, which embodies McCarthy's tendency to turn to Mexico in order to escape the constructions of history and Western culture while maintaining Porter's ethnographic fascination with donning new racial identities. However, unlike the McCarthy and Porter writings I examine in this thesis, only a small portion of *On the Road* is actually set in Mexico (53 of 307 pages), and in order to understand Kerouac's use of that country it is necessary that I examine the strategies that Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty employ in their search for "IT" before they ever cross the border into Mexico. In this light, Sal is of particular interest. Disgusted by the constructedness of Western society, he turns to friendship with Dean, relies on cross-country movement, and appropriates non-white racial identities before finding what he mistakes for authenticity among Mexico's indigenous peoples. Although Sal can distinguish between simulations and originals in his own cultural context, he becomes increasingly unable to make that distinction as he encounters racialized Others; upon entering Mexico, he thinks he has found supreme

authenticity, when instead, the Mexico he accesses exists only in the realm of the hyperreal.

While *On the Road* is not the only one of Kerouac's works to involve Mexico, it is by far the most influential, coming to define an entire group of writers as it did. The novel documents the cross-country journeys of Kerouac¹ (fictionalized and embodied as Sal Paradise in the book) and his friend Neal Cassady, upon whom the character Dean Moriarty is based. By contemporary standards, Sal and especially Dean most often appear to be reckless drifters in pursuit of drugs, women, and other "kicks." However, the historical moment of the book's setting must be considered in order to understand the forces these characters were reacting against.

The late 1940s and early 1950s were a time of intense social conformity and Cold War anxiety. The Beats, and Kerouac in particular, saw much around them to critique, or at least escape. These include modern notions of progress, the capitalistic reification of time, traditional family structures, and even the reigning intellectual climate. Each of these points is evident in *On the Road*. First, rather than enhancing life, the novel sees scientific progress as being used to annihilate it, as demonstrated by the creation of the atomic bomb. Bull Lee shares a common Beat sentiment by referring to scientists as "the bastards right now [who] are only interested in seeing if they can blow up the world" (153). As for notions of time, Sal laments the fact that it has become a quantity to be bought and sold; his response to his temporary job at a fruit market is "In God's name

¹ As Robert Holton notes, there are really three voices in *On the Road*: Sal Paradise the character, whose actions the book chronicles; the older Sal Paradise, who narrates stories about his past; and Kerouac, who bases most of the book on his own experiences (20). This distinction is worth keeping in mind because it highlights the fact that while the book is mainly autobiographical, it has been crafted and fictionalized to some extent. However, while I will use the name Sal in this chapter, I believe that much of my argument could be applied to Kerouac too, for I agree with Tim Hunt, who argues that Kerouac is writing a "biography of his self-image" (5).

and under the stars, what for?" (177). Why sell time for money? The falseness and superficiality of middle-class culture—along with its reliance on the nuclear family—becomes clear from Sal's rehearsal of a Christmas family get together, in which relatives engage in a "weary recapitulation of who had a baby, who got a new house, and so on" while talking about mundane subjects like the weather (109). Finally, Chad King, the anthropologist, is portrayed as studying life at the loss of living it, and Roland Major writes a story in which "the arty types were all over America, sucking up its blood" (40). Together, these critiques share a concern about a lack of authentic American experience; as Simon Rycroft puts it, they constitute an "intellectual revolt" (426) against conventionality. Thus, *On the Road* can be described as a pilgrimage of sorts, where Sal and Dean are searching for the elusive "IT": a form of spiritual enlightenment or genuine connection with the universe and its inhabitants that escapes the stifling conventions of middle-class American jobs, relationships, and academics.

The search for "IT" in the United States is complicated and often compromised by the extent to which images had become objects of mass consumption in this country. Dennis McNally observes that "As Jack [Kerouac] left for Mexico City, the Atomic Energy Commission demonstrated a nuclear explosion in Yucca Flat, Nevada, thrilling some 35 million Americans who watched it on television at home" (156). The destruction the bomb could engender was incredible, yet the pain and loss of its victims were overshadowed for the American public by the widespread, reoccurring image of the bomb's mushroom cloud, an image that in essence became the *raison d'être* for the Cold War.

Movies were also a significant aspect of the mid-twentieth-century mediascape, with Hollywood's golden age having ended just a decade before. Evidence of the cinema's prevalence is seen in Kerouac's repeated references to directors, actors, and movies in *On the Road*, including W.C. Fields, Gary Cooper, Gene Autry, *The Mark of Zorro* (1940), *Sullivan's Travels* (1941), *Of Mice and Men* (1939), and several Westerns. The Beats had an ambivalent relationship with Hollywood. On the one hand, Kerouac clearly saw a lot of movies and seemed to consider them a valuable form of entertainment. On the other, motion pictures of this era, which David Sterritt argues "generally tried to function as a guardian of traditional values and the sociopolitical status quo" (6), were also integral to the mainstream culture that Sal (and Kerouac) resist. Evidence that Kerouac recognizes this fact is found in his portrayal of Sal's only literary failure in *On the Road*. In writing a film script for which his guiding objective is not artistic but monetary, Sal attempts a story that "would satisfy a Hollywood director" (63). Kerouac therefore also sees Hollywood as creating conformity to empty values. The most important thing to note in terms of my argument, though, is that whatever Sal's (and by extension Kerouac's) feelings toward movies, Sal is able to distinguish the dividing line between the simulated and the real while he's in the United States. That he frequently references films in recounting his surroundings and actions does not mean that he confuses movies with reality. Rather than a replacement of reality, Sal's film references serve as a *lingua franca* of sorts, a shorthand way of relating experience to other American youth who are also part of a media saturated culture. Every time Sal utters a movie title he is in a way demarcating the division between what is and what has only appeared on screen.

Sal is also able to recognize simulations off-screen and uses them as a measure of what reality is not. This point becomes especially visible in regard to the Old West. When Sal arrives in Cheyenne, a Wild West Week is in progress. Sal declares, “I was amazed, and at the same time I felt it was ridiculous: in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition” (30). In this moment, Sal sees the West—which he has long fantasized about experiencing—as a construction. But paradoxically, Sal’s realization shows that the West has not, to use Baudrillard’s term, been reduced to “pure simulacrum” (173). It does not exist only in the realm of signifiers, for Sal also has access to pioneer history (10) to tell him that contemporary representations of the West are just that: copies of an original, though an original that has passed. Whether Sal’s conception of an authentic West ever actually existed is beside the point. What is important is that while he is in the United States, he is able to distinguish simulation from the simulated, while in Mexico he is not, as I will argue later in this chapter. Because he finds U.S. simulations as a sign of the bankruptcy of contemporary experience, Sal first turns to friendship with Dean as a remedy for this inauthenticity.

If the West has succumbed to tourism and a reliance on stock images, Dean Moriarty is a true cowboy, though not because he conforms to the image of one. Sal’s dismissal of a cowboy “in a ten-gallon hat and Texas boots” who “looks like any beat character of the brickwall dawns of the East except for his getup” (17) proves that appearances aren’t to be trusted anyway. Instead, Dean is a cowboy in the sense that he is an outsider who refuses to conform to social expectations. Though Dean is extremely promiscuous and mobile, he is in the strange position of maintaining (or at least staying connected to) three separate family units by the end of the novel, a subversion of

traditional family structure rather than a dismissal of it. Furthermore, he follows a schedule with minute exactness, but it is one of his own making (in Denver he tells Sal “I haven’t had time to work in weeks”) (44). He is also curious and bright without being tainted by the “tedious intellectualness” (7) of a university-trained thinker. Rather than studying any subject formally, he expends enormous amounts of energy connecting with people, evidenced in part by his all-night talks with Carlo Marx, in which the two attempt “to communicate with absolute honesty and absolute completeness” (41). For all of these reasons, Dean serves as a “Prophet,” or countercultural model, for Sal, though Dean too must journey in search of the elusive “IT.” However, by virtue of his parentage and time in prison, Dean has an advantage over Sal in reaching this metaphysical goal: he is located on the social margins, which Kerouac figures as a position of power for someone attempting to escape artificiality. The socially marginal live outside of white, middle-class America and all of the expectations and behavioral codes that accompany it. Therefore, they aren’t pressured to follow a scripted role that produces wealthy, predictable citizens while discouraging individuality and genuine social connectedness.

Sal partially recedes (or in this context proceeds) into the social margins by traveling cross-country in a mode closer to a hobo than a tourist. But more significant is his reason for traveling at all. Foremost in Sal’s desire to move across the physical space of the United States is a yearning to undergo first-hand a wide range of “authentic” experiences. As he leaves his university life and book-writing behind in New York, he abandons the vicarious in favor of the literal; no longer is he “vaguely planning and never taking off” (1). On a practical level, as Sal crisscrosses the continent, he is also largely free of family commitments and paid labor. In fact, when his temporary stay in any city

results in either of these two restrictions, he feels the pull of the road and returns to his travels.

However, movement does not ultimately offer Sal the degree of authenticity he seeks. One reason for this, as Linda McDowell convincingly argues, is that the Beat movement “simultaneously reflects and challenges hegemonic cultural values” (413) in large part because in principle, leaving home as a form of rebellion requires a home from which to leave. By jumping from journey to journey, *On the Road* seduces the casual reader into the perception that movement was a constant for Kerouac and gang. Yet, no matter how many hitchhikers Dean picks up or how much food Sal steals, life on the road is not indefinitely sustainable, and McDowell documents the many homes that supported members of the Beat community, including Kerouac, who consistently returned to the home of his mother (reconfigured as Sal’s aunt) when road-weary. Kerouac makes the rhetorical choice to emphasize movement in the novel in order to heighten the countercultural image of him and his characters. Sal and Dean apparently spend most of their time zipping across the fifty states, and in so doing reject things like home ownership, with its implicit rootedness, which is so integral to the American Dream.

Indeed, when Sal does go home, Kerouac tends to mystify his reasons for doing so with statements like “It was time for us to move on” (244), while he avoids declaring the obvious: home doesn’t feel authentic, but neither does any other location that America’s roads lead to. Sal’s need for movement can be read as symptomatic of someone used to consuming the flickering and ever-changing images projected by mass media. While varied countryside and cities flash by—the faster the better—Sal is at his most excited and/or content. But when he slows down enough to actually see America in

detail, he finds that what had previously excited or contented him was yet another simulation of sorts, that movement merely blurs the constructedness of the entire country. Perhaps it is for this reason that after a while Sal starts feeling less like a world-wise “Prophet” (35) and more like a “traveling salesman” (247). He is in effect wearing thin the country’s land; it runs out at each coast, forcing him to either become stationary or retrace his steps in a pattern that becomes increasingly claustrophobic and emblematic of the worst mainstream culture has to offer—a job that requires one to leave home and family in pursuit of money rather than enlightenment, or the inverse of the Beat persona.

Sal’s attempts to adopt the roles of racialized Others offer him another path toward social marginality while pointing toward his ultimate decision to head to Mexico. The most obvious examples are when he is living with Terry and gets mistaken for a Mexican (commenting “and in a way I am”) (98), and later in the novel when Sal walks through the “colored section” of Denver, wishing he were “a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned.” He also laments that he is not one of the “happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (179–80). Interpretations of these sentiments have varied to astounding degrees. Critics read Sal’s desires as being motivated by everything from neocolonial disillusionment with white freedom “burdened by responsibility of governing” (Saldaña 96), to self-disgust and an “exhaustion of whiteness” (Adams 62), to an identification that allows for political unification and social progress (Cleaver in Belgrad 9). The diversity of these reactions indicates the complicated politics surrounding racial identification. The first reading is the least convincing in my mind, since the novel lacks evidence that Sal is

interested in governing anyone, including himself; however, the last two necessitate further discussion.

The second reading bears up well when we consider the jazz scenes in *On the Road*. Sal and Dean's fascination with jazz is symptomatic of white appropriation of African-American music in general (both during this period and since). Jazz is portrayed as a well-spring of energy and innovation that can counter white "exhaustion" in addition to providing a road toward "IT." One horn player is described as blowing "a big foghorn blues out of every muscle in his soul," (177) and it's this kind of playing that sends Dean into a "trance"(198) and causes him venerate the musician Slim, a "God" who "knows time" (177). Hearken back to the likes of Josephine Baker and her "jungle dance," complete with banana skirt, and it becomes clear that jazz in the white American mind has also long been linked with the primitive (Torgovnick 111). Indeed, Kerouac draws on the primitive directly in portraying another musician who "hopped and monkeydanced" (202). Thus, before Sal and Dean ever cross the border into Mexico—which to them is Other in a distinctly primitive way as well—they are already searching for and encountering a similar source of "authenticity" in the United States.

That these musicians of color seem to have access to the authentic is found in the fact that their San Francisco locale was at "the end of the continent" and "they didn't give a damn" (178). They don't mind running out of land, as it were, because they don't have to resort to reality-blurring movement to temporarily conceal the falseness of America. They seem to embody the principle of enlightenment and connectedness that Sal and Dean envy. Yet, the jazz musician is not of the same world as Kerouac's characters—Slim is neither anxious to get to New York nor game for the wife-swapping Beat

lifestyle. As he looks at Dean “out of the corner of his eye” Slim forcefully asserts, “I tole you I was *married* to her, didn’t I?” after Dean shows a little too much interest in Slim’s “darling” (200). Though Dean and Sal can temporarily take part in the genuine experience of jazz, they must go to Mexico in order to be fully immersed in the seeming authenticity a greater degree of Otherness can provide. This is true in part because in Mexico, they are better able to project their own sensibilities onto the Other without those Others talking back and asserting their own worldviews, at least not in a language Dan and Sal can understand.

The final reading, that Sal is progressive rather than racist or insensitive in his desire to assume another ethnicity, has much in common with the argument I make about Katherine Anne Porter in Chapter Three. At first, Kerouac seems to be writing himself into ethnic spaces the same way in which Porter does in her story “María Concepción,” for example, where she figures herself Indian. Furthermore, he too seems to be drawing on the visual techniques of representation that Porter uses in “Xochimilco.” Such techniques are readily apparent if we return to the scene in Denver’s “colored section.” Kerouac, through Sal, portrays a baseball game, which would normally be described with an emphasis on movement, in a very static way: the game is “at night, under lights” during which the “strange young heroes of all kinds, white, colored, Mexican, pure Indian, were on the field, performing with heart-breaking seriousness. Just sandlot kids in uniform” (180). More attention is given to the physical appearance of these players (though characteristically, Kerouac is still slim on adjectives) than to what they are actually doing. Together they form a veritable multicultural promotional poster, upon which every shade of skin in joined in the most American of sports. Another scene lends

itself to a similar analysis. During Sal's cotton-picking days he tells of an "old Negro couple" who "picked cotton with the same God-blessed patience their grandfathers had practiced in ant-bellum Alabama; they moved right along their rows, bent and blue, and their bags increased" (96). Down to the painterly hue Kerouac gives this couple, it would be hard to find a figurative snapshot of slavery more stock than this. Both images constitute what Sterritt calls the "verbal tapestry" (9) of *On the Road*.

These two visually-oriented depictions could offer politically progressive messages; first, that the United States is a place where immigrants from around the world can enjoy the good life and each other's company; and second, nearly a hundred years after emancipation, African-Americans unfortunately have yet to break free of slavery-era roles. However, while Porter strategically creates images of the racialized Other for the practical purpose of bettering their social conditions, Kerouac's reliance on the same visual techniques are instead motivated by an attempt to reach "IT" himself. He feels despair for himself, not happiness for the neighborhood baseball players. Similarly, his tryst with backbreaking labor doesn't elicit sympathy for those who don't have the luxury to quit it, as he does. The images Sal creates seem ignorant rather than consciously constructed. In a text that largely defends Sal's encounters with Others, Omar Swartz concedes that Sal and Dean are engaged in racial poaching to some degree, "borrowing the language, music, drugs, and despair of a repressed people in order to redescribe their own positions" (88). However, the poacher must first trespass on the Other's territory, so to speak, in order to recognize those cultural traits attractive enough to steal. In other words, poaching, while undoubtedly a harmful act, implies that the poacher gains a degree of cultural familiarity (if not understanding) with those from whom he poaches.

Though Sal shares physical space with Mexicans, Indians, and African Americans, he only skirts around the edges of their cultural worlds. Therefore I would argue that what exactly Sal is poaching is more open to debate than Swartz implies. Arguably, Sal primarily poaches the stereotypical images he projects onto these ethnic Others in the first place, images that we might expect from films like *Angels in the Outfield* (1951)² or the hugely popular *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Significantly, Sal, who is so quick to correlate cinematic moments with aspects of his own culture is surprisingly mute on that subject in these instances of *On the Road*. With so little cultural knowledge to go on, Sal mistakes pop-cultural racial images with reality even though he has rejected similar simulations of the West.

Thus Sal remains far removed from anything that could be called a reality (as problematic as that term is) of minority lives in America. Race and economic class have long been linked in this country, and most of the Others Sal encounters are distinct from him not only by virtue of their ethnicity but also their position on a lower economic plane. As R.J. Ellis notes, for as much as Sal may like to spend time on the social fringes, he always has recourse to a position of privilege, as demonstrated by the easy hundred dollars a rich girl offers him to go to San Francisco (46). Though the page before, it seems that nothing short of a darker shade of skin will content Sal, upon receiving the money he declares, “So all my problems were solved” (181). In addition, when things get complicated with Terry, Sal writes his aunt for some more cash (98), which subsequently allows him to abandon what had become a troublesome life. Sal consistently escapes the

² In fact, there was a whole rash of baseball films in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s: *Death on the Diamond* (1934), *The Babe Ruth Story* (1948), *The Kid from Cleveland* (1949), *The Stratton Story* (1949), *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950), *The Winning Team* (1952), *Pride of St. Louis* (1952), and *Damn Yankees* (1958).

knowledge (and hardship) that would come with recognizing that his identification with racialized Others is only image-deep and that to be a person of color in America may often mean living in poverty.

Considering the overwhelming role images play in Sal's dealings with other races, it is not surprising that he meets Terry en route to Los Angeles—the chief manufacturer of virtual America. To take that characterization a step further, we can think of Los Angeles in the mid-twentieth century as a simulation of sorts itself. Baudrillard writes of Disneyland as “presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (175). Fittingly, Sal notes that Main Street LA is “no different from where you get off a bus in Kansas City or Chicago or Boston” (83). This observation suggests that Sal recognizes that these streets, and perhaps the cities that house them, are all hyperreal to some extent—like Disneyland's Mainstreet USA, copies of an original that never existed. Accordingly, Kerouac writes of Sal's surreal experience of encountering a city full of beautiful people performing ordinary jobs along with a description of LA as a “desert encampment” (87), indicating that Sal sees the city in terms of a mirage—a shimmering yet insubstantial vision. Finally, Sal notes that the grey dawn of a Hollywood morning is akin to “the dawn when Joel McCrea met Veronica Lake in a diner in the picture *Sullivan Travels*” (83), yet again drawing comparisons (and thereby distinctions) between reality and simulations.

And yet, significantly, while Sal has been able to identify the artificiality of several U.S. constructs, including now the simulated nature of LA, he falls into a scripted role with Terry once inside that city. He can't recognize the way in which LA constructs

their relationship based on race: “I began getting the foolish paranoid visions that Teresa, or Terry—her name—was a common little hustler who worked the buses for a guy’s bucks by making appointments like ours in LA” (83). Terry as a poor, brown woman makes more sense in this context as a prostitute than as a “girl-soul.” Even more interesting is Sal’s verbal slip. Though he has conceived of Terry as another human being up until now, she becomes visibly Mexican to him in this moment—a Teresa rather than an anglicized Terry. Sal clearly has a preconceived image of what it means to be Mexican, and he is delighted to see that image substantiated when he finally crosses the border into Mexico, where he encounters a place so Other to him that he no longer has the ability to distinguish the real from the hyperreal, thereby mistaking the latter for authenticity.

First, though, it is important to remember that Sal and Dean’s plan to cross that border share a practical motivation similar to that of Glanton’s gang in *Blood Meridian*, for whom Mexico provides a haven from U.S. law. Dean is drawn to Mexico by the promise of easy access to a divorce from Camille, while both men (in addition to Kerouac, who himself traveled to Mexico multiple times) feel the pull of cheap, abundant drugs. Even money ceases to be a worry, as Sal and Dean revel in the “wonderful Mexican money that went so far” (275). But the immaterial reasons for this journey far outweigh the practical, significant as they are.

That Sal experiences Mexico as hyperreal (more real than real) is clear from his declaration upon crossing the border, when he happily proclaims, “Just across the street Mexico began. We looked with wonder. To our amazement, it looked exactly like Mexico” (274). Specifically, the men in “straw hats and white pants...lounging by the

dozen against bettered pocky storefronts” (274) coincide with what Sal thinks Mexicans should look like. But it is significant that Sal uses the word *Mexico*, not *Mexican*, for it indicates that the entire country conforms to his media-informed preconceptions of it. Ironically, though, Sal and Dean also find Mexico as the supreme source of authenticity that, according to Dean, “will finally take us to IT!” (265). At this moment in the text, Mexico simultaneously fits into categories of the stereotypical and the authentic, a seeming contradiction, but one that makes sense by again turning to Baudrillardian conceptions of simulation.

Sal’s vision of Mexico can be classified as hyperreal in *On the Road* precisely because Sal misrecognizes its simulated nature for authenticity. According to Baudrillard, the hyperreal constitutes “the generation of models of the real without origin or reality” (169). Put another way, the hyperreal moves beyond “reduplication” and “parody” in “substituting signs of the real for the real itself” (70). Baudrillard would therefore say that Mexico in the context of Sal’s mind is a free-floating network of signs whose purpose is to “incite desire” (3). To be fair, here Baudrillard is referring specifically to consumer objects, while I am expanding his analysis to include an entire country. I feel justified in doing so, however, thanks to the degree in which Mexico works as an object to be consumed by the experience-craving Sal and Dean. Mexico not only contains the “girls” and the “visions” that Sal expected to find on his journey—which he encounters in the brothel and in the jungle, when he literally sees the white horse that had previously existed only figuratively—but Mexico itself is arguably the “pearl” (8) that motivated Sal’s travels in the first place.

It is important to note that while Mexico “incite[s] desire” in Sal and Dean, it is not because a force outside of them (such as an advertising firm) has constructed a hyperreality to do so; instead, both men project their own desires onto Mexico and, not surprisingly, see their dreams reflected in its landscapes, institutions, and people (“all Mexico was one vast Bohemian camp”) (301). In this sense, Kerouac shares with McCarthy the use of Mexico as a yardstick against which the faults of the United States can be measured; however, Kerouac does so less self-consciously. Therefore, while I have described McCarthy’s Mexico as a mirror, Kerouac’s is better described as a blank screen, upon which simulated images of Beat desires flicker, masking the complexity of the world behind. In the end, Sal’s eyes are quick to “read” America, an action that implies both an original and a highly abstracted sign (the word), while he himself participates in the conflation of the original and the sign as he views Mexico.

By understanding that Sal participates in the construction of Mexico as hyperreal, it becomes clear why, as Manuel Luis Martínez argues, Sal—who was so interested in appropriating a new racial identity while in the United States—becomes distinctly American when in Mexico (49). Whereas Sal sees himself as Mexican when with Terry, he now notices the “strangeness of Americans and Mexicans blasting together on the desert and, more than that, the strangeness of seeing in close proximity the faces and pores of skins and calluses of fingers and general abashed cheekbones of another world” (283). This cinematic rendering—a metonymical close-up—differentiates Sal one cheekbone and finger at a time from the Mexican Other. In the United States, Sal sought to identify with the Mexican American in an attempt to gain marginality. South of the border, he contrasts himself to a people of the same ethnicity because in order for Mexico

to be a place of authenticity, it must be totally distinct from the constructedness of the United States, of which he is a part. Put another way, the Mexican Other, in order to fit in this hyperreal environment, must be wholly separate from Sal—who still exists in the realm of originals—in order to be authentic.

The moment in *On the Road* that most succinctly sums up Kerouac's use of Mexico is found when the Pan-American Highway takes Sal and Dean high into the mountains, where they encounter an indigenous population they deem supremely authentic because they live outside of time, the carrier of civilization. Kerouac likens these Indians to the Fellaheen peoples he had read about in Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*, who escape history and therefore are left the sole survivors when civilization inevitably destroys itself. Accordingly, Kerouac situates this encounter between Sal and Dean and the "Fellaheen" as a meeting of the West with the rest of the undeveloped world, stretching from China to India, Arabia, Morocco, Polynesia, and Spain (280). He writes of the Indians coming from remote places to reach civilization (as represented by Sal and Dean), not knowing the "poor broken delusion of it," not knowing that "a bomb had come that could crack all our bridges and roads and reduce them to jumbles, and we would be as poor as they someday, and stretching out our hands in the same, same way" (298). But in the same breath that Kerouac shows the Fellaheen to be absolutely free of all Western constructions, he also describes them in terms that the Catholic Kerouac himself projects—the Indian girls had the "eyes of the Virgin Mother.... We saw in them the tender and forgiving gaze of Jesus" (296). A fetishized timelessness has given way to what was always behind the search for authenticity—spiritual blessedness, or the

beatification from which the label “beat” originally came, according to Kerouac, who not surprisingly named his fictional counterpart Sal *Paradise*.

But another way of looking at the meaning of “authentic,” one more germane to my argument, is also possible: authenticity can denote a system of representation that can be trusted, where signs correspond one-to-one with the signified. Sal has clearly lost faith in what the Western world has to offer in large part because he recognizes that “civilization” is full of simulation that often “masks or perverts a basic reality” (Baudrillard 173). In fact, Baudrillard argues that “All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager of representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could *exchange* for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange—God of course” (173). This concept perhaps illuminates Kerouac’s reason for figuring Mexico’s Indians as both Fellahin peoples and Christ figures; these double subject positions simultaneously render them liminal and, according to Baudrillard, central to Western schemes of representation. They offer both a way out of the representational system and a guarantee of its signs’ exchange value. However, of all the Others Kerouac has described thus far in the book, none are more silent or painterly than these brown-eyed Indians. As readers, we never hear them speak a word; their sounds are only conveyed as “yammering.” Instead, Kerouac tells us that “When they talked they suddenly became frantic and almost silly. In their silence they were themselves” (297). In their silence, Mexican Others embody representational integrity in Sal’s mind by appearing as both sign and signified; Sal and Dean don’t recognize the gap between the simulation they project onto these people and the people themselves. Voiceless, they are relegated to the realm of the hyperreal, which Sal and Dean mistake for the authentic.

And this is the novel's final irony—at the very moment when IT seems attainable, simulacrum reigns supreme.

If Kerouac had been able to access something beyond the hyperreal in Mexico, he may have been surprised to find that instead of offering an authentic counterpoint to the United States, Mexico was home to countercultural allies who shared many Beat sensibilities. For instance, Rachel Adams and Daniel Belgrad have documented intellectual connections between the Beats and *La Onda* (a Mexican youth movement) and Magic Realists, respectively. Although a discussion of such connections fall outside the purview of this chapter, I note their existence to show that the Mexico Kerouac perceived—or at least the one he chose to portray in *On the Road*—shares little with this other Mexican reality it seems he should have been drawn to. The fact that he participates in the simulation of Mexico as hyperreal therefore takes on the dimensions of a choice, perhaps a rhetorical one, not merely an inevitability. This choice becomes even more interesting when considered against Katherine Anne Porter's decision to portray Mexico and its peoples in a similarly visual way, though to more overtly political ends.

Chapter Three:

Katherine Anne Porter and the Politics of Representation

Though Katherine Anne Porter's time spent in Mexico has long been read as a personal search for Eden—not unlike Jack Kerouac's in some ways—critics have recently problematized her move south, claiming that Porter's representations of Mexico's Indians rely on discourses of imperialism. It is all too easy to classify Porter as a colonialist writer—a characteristic modernist, she went to a foreign land and wrote stories that arguably romanticized the country's "primitive" peoples and landscapes. However, Porter also went to Mexico in order to participate in its budding (post)revolutionary society. As a committed socialist, she cared deeply about alleviating poverty, illiteracy, and landlessness among the country's subalterns. Additionally, she was strongly influenced by the art of the Mexican muralist movement led by Diego Rivera, including its utilization of a pre-Columbian aesthetic. By crossing the generic lines separating visual arts and literature, and fiction and non-fiction, Porter engaged in a strategy of explicitness that opened up a hybrid space where her modernist political engagement was tempered by a postmodern awareness.

When many other modernist writers were going to Paris to join the burgeoning artistic scene there while enjoying a lower cost of living, Katherine Anne Porter instead headed to Mexico for practical, political, and artistic reasons. Porter called Mexico her "familiar country" ("Why I Write About Mexico" 355), citing as a main reason a trip with her father when she was ten years old that left her "impressed with those wonderful, wide streets and the painted carriages and the horses with silver bridle reins" (Givner, *Conversations* 113). Biographers have classified the account of this trip as at least

inflated, but more likely imagined, and Janis Stout reasons that Porter's "claims of early familiarity with Mexico seem to have been based on very slight experience and to have been made in an effort to evade possible charges of shallow adventurism" (*Sense of the Times* 70). Whatever the reason, this so-called familiarity enabled Porter, as it did and does Kerouac and McCarthy, to write about the Other with less inhibition than is characteristic of much American writing.

Though Porter may have described her decision to go to Mexico as "natural" (Stout, *Sense of the Times* 78), there were many practical reasons for the trip as well. After moving to Greenwich Village in October of 1919, she took on a heavy load of writing assignments for various publications. When she felt the need to escape some of these responsibilities, she first looked to Spain for a change in scenery but was soon persuaded by her radical Mexican artist friends, including Adolpho Best-Maugard, that revolutionary Mexico offered a more dynamic destination, one that appealed to her socialist³ sensibilities. In addition, Porter was offered a job with *Magazine of Mexico*, a publication written, ironically, for American businessmen. Once in Mexico, she also became an editor for the English language portion of *El Heraldo de Mexico*. These sources of income, as well as freelance work she did for New York-based periodicals and a recently acquired position as a ghostwriter for *My Chinese Marriage* provided Porter with the means to travel to Mexico in November 1920. Her increasing awareness that the country offered her a rich source of subject matter for her "artistic" writing as well as the

³ The depth of Porter's radicalism during the 1920s and 1930s has been the subject of some debate. While Porter has sometimes been characterized as only half-heartedly subscribing to socialist principles due to the influence of her Greenwich Village friends, Janis Stout has argued that her leftist political leanings started developing much earlier in life, in Texas, and that her concern for Mexico's indigenous landless population, and perhaps her interest in Marxist theory, ran deep. I choose the word *socialist* to describe Porter's political affiliation even though she identified herself as a communist during this period because Stout characterizes her as more "generally radical than...specifically Communist" ("Something of a Reputation" 52).

excitement of the Obregón revolution motivated her to stay there. Later, Porter attributed her move to Mexico entirely to a desire “to study the Aztec and Mayan art designs” (Givner, *Conversations* 86). While clearly this wasn’t wholly true, Porter’s interest in precolonial art forms in Mexico had been sparked by Best-Maugard, who, according to Stout, “was sympathetic to the goals of the Revolution and was then developing theories of the primitive origins and patterns of art that were consistent with those goals” (*Sense of the Times* 46). Thus, significantly, in Porter’s mind art was linked with revolution and the idea of social change early on in the writer’s Mexican experience.

This linkage perhaps explains why Porter went from portraying Mexico’s indigenous in a pessimistic light to idealizing them, a pattern that, as Jeraldine Kraver⁴ has noted, does not align with the standard reading of Mexico as a promised land that slowly lost its charm as reality set in for Porter (“Troubled Innocent Abroad” 54–55). Upon arriving in Mexico, Porter wrote a piece for *El Heraldo* called “The Fiesta of Guadalupe,” in which her initial shock at the poverty she found in Mexico is clear, as is her assessment of the revolution as ineffective. Written in one night, the sketch clearly captures what Stout has argued is a genuine concern and caring for the Mexican Indian (“Something of a Reputation” 54). Porter writes of “faces a little stained with long-borne fatigue” (“Fiesta of Guadalupe” 33) and “brown and work-stained hands....reaching, reaching, reaching” (36). The revolution has failed these Indians, who, poverty-stricken and landless, have “only the anodyne of credulity” (36) in the Virgin to buoy them up.

⁴ Though I use this observation of Kraver’s as a starting point for my discussion on Porter’s views of Mexican Indians, our arguments depart there. She points out the incorrectness of reading Mexico as a promised land for Porter in order to show how Porter’s attitudes toward the Other followed a colonial pattern outlined by Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and the Colonized*: astonishment at the Other’s poverty, which develops into a romanticization of the Other, and finally results in a “loss of sympathy with Mexico’s oppressed indigenous peoples” (“Troubled Innocent Abroad” 60).

When Porter closes the essay with “I feel beating under their work-stained clothes like a great volcano under the earth and I think to myself, hopefully, that men do not dream forever” (37), she is commenting less on the dreamers themselves than on one of the forces that keep these men dreaming—namely the Catholic church, which she would later identify as part of the repressive triumvirate of Church, Land, and Oil in “The Mexican Trinity” (1921). Indeed, in this essay lies an answer to Kraver’s argument that in “The Fiesta of Guadalupe” the Indians are “apparently unwilling to embrace the revolution” (“Troubled Innocent Abroad” 61), a claim similar to one that she later makes when she argues that Porter was disillusioned with the Mexican Other (“Laughing Best” 57). Though in “The Mexican Trinity” Porter does complain that “the revolution has not yet entered into the souls of the Mexican people,” she quickly follows this statement by blaming Mexico’s national literature for failing to incite revolutionary zeal, while acknowledging that the real problem lies in the widespread illiteracy of most of the country’s citizens. If the Indians constitute an “inert and slow-breathing mass,” it is because they have endured “four centuries of servitude” and continue to suffer at the hands of land-grabbing foreigners, with whom the Church is allied (401–402).

Therefore, as is true of Porter’s last Mexican story, *Hacienda*, and despite many critical claims to the contrary, Porter’s views of the Indian’s role in the revolution do not seem to change much over the course of her Mexican career: the indigenous are never portrayed as a *cause*, though they are often a *sign*, of the revolution’s failings. Instead, what changes is the manner in which Porter chooses to represent these indigenous Others. And her choice to turn to an idealized depiction of Indian life in her subsequent sketch “Xochimilco” (May 1921) has much in common with ideas leading up to the Mexican

Mural Renaissance, initiated by Diego Rivera's return to Mexico in July 1921, ideas that valued the revolutionary potential of indigenous art forms and culture. Porter engaged in a verbal equivalent of Rivera's frescoes, which on her next trip to Mexico she would see as an important solution to the twin problems of apathy and illiteracy.

It is not in the least surprising that "Xochimilco" has traditionally been read as Edenic, if not "outright colonial," as Rob Johnson puts it (192). Stout similarly complains that "Porter's portrayal of the indigenous people in Mexico, undoubtedly intended sympathetically, attributes to them a set of traits that betray the stereotyping and reductiveness of the imperial viewer" ("South from the South" 23). Outside of its historical context, this story indeed reads like a colonialist journal. Here is but one example: "Our boat boy seats himself cross-legged in the prow. He has the composure of a statue, his eyes slanted and meditative." (78). The "boat boy" fulfills the trope of the silent, picturesque Indian who serves the white colonialist without complaint.

However, Porter's recourse to the language of visual arts (the boy as a statue) is symptomatic of the way she portrays all of the Indians in this sketch. Women are shown posing on rocks, "heads thrown back, faces turned away a little, eyes closed before the sunlight" (75), while "A girl wearing a gay pink reboso, with gold hoops in her ears, sits in a vast bouquet of pansies, white violets, sweet peas and delicate pale roses" (76). Porter is creating verbal paintings of her Indian subjects similar to the ones Diego Rivera would begin portraying a year later in his first commissioned murals. Ruth Alvarez and Thomas Walsh express their strong preference ("Xochimilco" 73) for the original version of this sketch, titled "Children of Xochitl," which includes a much greater degree of anticlerical commentary as well as reference (as the title indicates) to Xochitl, the

goddess of pulque.⁵ Both elements, as might be expected, were excised before publication of the piece in the *Christian Science Monitor*. However, I find it significant that in Porter's revision there is a greater compression of verbal portraits than in the original, and these portraits are more potent since they stand together as a cohesive piece, uninterrupted by editorial comment. The effect is less didactic than the original version, yet equally political. Like Rivera, Porter was drawing on a pre-Columbian, precolonial past in order to critique the current political environment. The difference between the Indians of Xochimilco and those in the "Fiesta of Guadalupe" is that the former are "a splendid remnant of the Aztec race; they have maintained an almost unbroken independence of passing governments, and live their simple lives in a voluntary detachment from the ruling race of the country" (75), whereas the Indians in "The Fiesta of Guadalupe" suffer from the unhealthy interconnectedness of a colonial Catholic Church and a postrevolutionary government that hasn't lived up to all of its promises. The Indians of Xochimilco grow food on their own land, build and decorate boats to their liking, and even call each other "comrade" (77). In short, they represent the communist ideal of the worker who escapes alienation by producing finished products and owning the means of production. That Porter chooses to focus on the picturesque happiness that such empowerment brings might be classified as a form of what Gayatri Spivak has famously called "strategic essentialism." Porter essentializes Indians who are unhindered by anti-revolutionary elements in order to isolate the cause of the suffering that plagues the larger indigenous population. The nature of the Indians is not at fault; instead, the political structure that binds them needs to be overthrown.

⁵ Alvarez and Walsh note that "Although some Mexican Indians did worship earth goddesses in the form of the Christian Virgin, Xochitl—a literary invention of the seventeenth century—was not one of them." ("Xochimilco" 73).

Porter's second trip to Mexico, in April 1922, was prompted by an invitation from the Mexican government, who called on her to write a catalogue to accompany an exhibition of Mexican popular arts that was to travel around the United States, though ultimately the tour proved unsuccessful thanks to U.S. political opposition. It was at this time that she met Diego Rivera, who helped to organize the exhibition. Rivera was also working on his first mural, *Creation*, in the *Escuela Nacional Preparatoria*. This mural was commissioned by Education Minister José Vasconcelos as part of a larger public mural program that he hoped would aid in his popular education efforts, which included raising what was a 15 percent literacy rate in 1920. Vasconcelos enabled what has come to be called the Mexican Muralist Renaissance, whose beginnings are largely attributed to Rivera. Even so, it was David Alfaro Siqueiros who, in 1921, wrote the manifesto that captures the characteristics of this highly politicized movement. David Craven summarizes them as follows: 1) "a multicultural combination of non-Western and Western art"; 2) "a multilateral...sense of historical development"; 3) "a concerted reconsideration of the conventions of the visual language being used"; and 4) "a tacit commitment to anticolonialism enjoined with internationalism" (56). Rivera abandoned the cubist style he helped develop in Europe in favor of one both more realistic yet also simplistic and intensely colorful. Though this style often included an idealization of precolonial subjects, it also prompted Rivera's critics to label his human figures "Diego's monkeys" (Unrue, "The Martyr" 415). His medium—the fresco—had both European (Italian) and indigenous Mexican roots, dating back to ninth century Mayan murals (Hamill 87). In style, medium, and subject matter Rivera's murals embodied what Craven has so aptly called a "*mestizaje*," or collage, aesthetic—one that offered hope of a unified

national consciousness to be found in the mixed racial citizen whose Indian and Spanish blood symbolized the joining of indigenous and colonial cultures, or more accurately, a citizen with access to the social power of the Spanish as well as the cultural traditions of the Indian. His murals, designed as they were to offer the illiterate Indian an active role in social revolution, were intended to have a concrete political effect, in part evidenced by the government's constant unease at Rivera's communist messages. Therefore his simplification, or stylization, of the indigenous is not the move of a colonialist artist but rather a postcolonial one who resorts to a hybrid artistic form that could speak, if not for, at least to the subaltern.

Fittingly, Porter opens her *Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts* with an attribution to Rivera, along with Best-Maugard and Xavier Guerrero, acknowledging that they "have helped me to form my point of view and to place my sympathies" (138). To what degree Rivera, especially, influenced Porter's developing aesthetic is clear from her statement that "For myself, and I believe I speak for great numbers, Mexico does not appear to me as it did before I saw Rivera's paintings of it. The mountains, the Indians, the horses, the flowers and children, have all subtly changed in outlines and colors. They are Rivera's Indians and flowers and all now, but I like looking at them" (Unrue, "'The Martyr'" 413). She also liked writing them. Even though, as Mary Louise Pratt has noted in her study of Victorian discovery narratives, the aestheticization of peoples and landscapes is often a colonial move, Porter's form of aestheticization is more accurately termed postcolonial when linked to the political goals of the Mexican muralists, which Porter shared but also self-consciously critiqued. "María Concepción," the first short story Porter published, draws attention to the artistic and anthropological processes

embedded in the rhetoric of *indigenismo*, and in doing so explores a nonlinear conception of history.

Porter opens the story by verbally painting a series of images that figure María Concepción as a primitive earth goddess in tune with what Alvarez has argued is a pre-Conquest, “authentic Mexican landscape” (“Royalty in Exile” 92) characterized by a “white dusty road, where the maguey thorns and the treacherous curved spines of organ cactus had not gathered profusely” (3). Porter then places María Concepción on this road: she is described as possessing “instinctive serenity” that “softened her black eyes” while she “walked with the free, natural, guarded ease of the primitive woman carrying an unborn child. The shape of her body was easy, the swelling life was not a distortion, but the right inevitable proportions of a woman. She was entirely contented” (3). Notice how Porter is again using the language of a visual medium: she is concerned with proportion, shape, and color.

This rendering of an Indian woman is as stylized as any of Rivera’s images, and self-consciously so. Porter, like the Mexican muralists, is drawing upon the rhetoric of *indigenismo*, which glorified Mexico’s precolonial past in an attempt to shape its postcolonial culture and government. *Indigenismo* spanned artistic and political spheres in a way that many have labeled propagandistic, especially in the hands of Rivera. Porter too simultaneously engages both strands of this discourse, though her fiction is too subtle to be easily labeled propaganda. Even so, many critics have read “María Concepción” as simply a rejection of the colonial—in the form of Catholicism—in favor of an indigenous moral law, or a microcosm of the class struggle in which the oppressed come out victors. Both of these readings are convincing yet overly simplistic in that they fail to take into

account the complex dialogue at play between Porter's aesthetic and political representation in the story.

This dialogue can be accounted for by turning to Spivak's categories of representations as "proxy [*Vertretung*] and portrait [*Darstellung*]" (108). To act as a proxy in this case means to stand in for someone in a political sense, much as in the U.S. context a senator would, for example. The political representative speaks in behalf of her constituency because by virtue of location, time, and other factors they cannot speak for themselves in Congress. Because Porter went to Mexico as a socialist interested in the potential of the Mexican Revolution, much of her work can be seen as writing *for* the subaltern; that is, she offers a political representation of illiterate Mexican-Indians by "treading in [their] shoes" (Spivak 108), which she was interested in both literally—occasionally posing for pictures in traditional Indian clothing—and figuratively, writing herself as an Indian character in "María Concepción" (Walsh 83).⁶ Yet, Spivak notes, in order to speak in behalf of a group of people, one must first represent that group in a portrait sense as well. In the broadest terms, a senator's constituency is comprised of the people from her home state. More specifically, this group is broken into smaller units of students, the elderly, businesspeople, and the like. Each of these classifications, no matter how broad or narrow, relies on the essentializing action of portraiture as individual differences are overlooked in favor of a set of unifying characteristics that might be translated into political goals. Spivak argues that "Unless the complicity between these two things [forms of representation] is kept in mind, there can be a great deal of political

⁶ There are many parallels between Porter and María Concepción. Thomas Walsh points to Porter's "desire to triumph in a man's world, to rise above her lot and fulfill the promise of her nature" (83), while Unrue notes Porter's integration of "her personal experiences with lost children [through pregnancy complications and abortion] and betraying men" (*Life of an Artist* 94).

harm....The real debate is between these two ways of representing” (109). In “María Concepción,” Porter demonstrates this complicity by making explicit the use of *Darstellung* (portraiture) to achieve specific political goals through *Vertretung* (proxy), or the speaking *for* the Indian that *indigenismo* relied on.

Though María Concepción embodies an idealized precolonial figure at the outset of this story, Porter quickly complicates this image by describing María as a good capitalist as well. She is known for being able to “drive a bargain to the end” and can “bring out a sack of hard silver coins” when she wants to buy something. She prefers to purchase her medicine bottled as opposed to getting it from “Lupe the medicine woman” and *paid* for a marriage license (instead of getting married behind the church), which renders her “as proud as if she owned a hacienda” (4). Though revolutionary rhetoric drew on the figure of the Indian’s harmonious relationship with nature, Porter draws attention to the fact that the government’s socialist leanings and attempt at land reform have not been successful in offering an alternative to capitalism. She thus exposes the incongruence of using an aesthetic figuring of the Indian as subaltern for the purpose of attaining hierarchical political power in the form of an ineffective, if not corrupt, government. In order to be successful, the subaltern must pose as a colonial-type hacienda owner, an ironic position considering that such owners exploited the Indian population and the land.

Porter also interrogates the way that *indigenismo* relies on archeology at the expense of overlooking contemporary Indian cultures, even as she portrays her own fascination with indigenous artifacts in a problematic light. María Concepción sells chickens to an archaeologist named Givens (based on Porter’s real-life archeologist

friend, William Nivens), who displays an “unearthly delight” in finding “worn-out” pre-Columbian things. This is in contrast to the Indians working on the dig who “could make better ones [artifacts], perfectly stout and new, which they took to town and peddled to foreigners for real money” (6–7). Not only is the ideology of *indigenismo* and capitalism conflated here, but Porter also shows that the people who speak as proxies for the Indian—herself included—are drawing on a precolonial portrait that largely excludes the practical concerns of the postcolonial Indian, who needs, among other things, “real money” rather than just the currency of cultural purity to survive. Givens is repeatedly referred to as Juan’s “chief,” presumably a translation of the Spanish word *jefe*, which when used to refer to an employer would more correctly be translated as “boss.” However, rather than a mistranslation on Porter’s part, the use of “chief” here seems strategic in that it implies that Givens controls both monetary and cultural capital. Despite his European heritage, he fits the type of the indigenous “chief” more than anyone else in that stands as a guardian of what—even to contemporary Indians—can only be an imagined past, buried by centuries of colonialism.

María Concepción accesses this past by killing her rival María Rosa, for as Jane Krause Demouy argues, she is fulfilling the role of the “Aztec mother goddess,” who “demanded blood, sacrifice, and death” in order to access the power that made her the “fertility goddess of corn” (24). By slipping into what is a somewhat fanciful role in the context of the story, María Concepción bridges the gap between her former capitalist self and the imagined Indian of *indigenismo*. But if this blood ritual and subsequent animalistic delight in María Rosa’s baby mean that María Concepción comes to inhabit a precolonial world, it is significant that Juan does not. His story ends with reconciliation to

the fact that the fun of fighting in the revolution⁷ with María Rosa is over and his days as a laborer must again begin. His fall “straight back on the floor, almost instantly asleep, his arms flung up and outward” (21) suggests a posture of crucifixion to some. However, Juan also mirrors the position of Rivera’s “Emergent Man,” who was the centerpiece of the artist’s first mural, *Creation*, which he began in 1922. Porter saw, and admired, the mural in progress before writing “María Concepción” in the same year. Whether it directly influenced her portrayal of Juan, the Emergent Man lends itself to Porter’s project, for his placement in thick vegetation aligns him with the unspoiled landscape of the pre-Columbian past, while the “New Testament symbols of the ox, lion, and eagle” (Catlin 238) surrounding him indicate his ability to merge with Spain’s Catholicism. In this sense, the Emergent Man and Juan are both *mestizos*, at least in an imaginative way. Juan is a pure-blooded Indian, but he lives in a world where political and economic conditions render him a hybrid subject straddling a colonial and indigenous heritage. Juan is represented through the processes of *Darstellung* (portraiture) in order to fulfill the political function of a nationally unifying symbol. By overtly aestheticizing those she wishes to speak for, Porter makes explicit the complicity between Spivak’s two forms of representation and exposes her own signifying act for what it is—essentialism in the name of a specific political goal.

The hybridity of this story plays out not only in terms of culture, morality, and economics, but also in the movement of history. The double presence of the imagined pre-Columbian past and the contemporary capitalist system breaks through what Walter Benjamin calls the illusion that “historical progress of mankind” moves through “a

⁷ Though in this first Mexican story, Porter is not as disillusioned with the revolution as she would get, it is clear that apart from providing Juan and María Rosa with a romantic adventure, the revolution has not benefited the Indian economically or politically.

homogenous, empty time” (261). Porter urges her readers to allow time to double back on itself without ever leaving the present moment. The indigenous can be both pre and postcolonial; in fact, they must be both in order to maintain their identities while gaining political rights. A partial parallel can be drawn here with Rivera. As a historical materialist, Rivera frequently engaged in what Ida Rodríguez-Prampolini calls “the simultaneous presentation of opposites...to express a dialectical development of history,” leading him to “sacrifice actual historical chronology” (133). However, though Porter shares with Rivera this simultaneous presentation of opposites, she does not do so in order to legitimate a higher synthesis of historical progression. She does not, for instance, present Catholicism as the natural, more civilized, progression from an older, primitive Aztec tradition. Instead, she shows that María Concepción is in an equally moral position—though not conventionally so—after having killed María Rosa as she was in praying at the church. She can be a good Catholic and an Aztec goddess too. For Porter, as for Benjamin, history is “time filled by the presence of the now” (*Illuminations* 261). The past is brought into the present, offering the chance for redemption, or revolution.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Porter not only crosses the boundary of visual and verbal representation but also that of fiction and non-fiction. She claimed that “everything [she] ever wrote in the way of fiction is based very securely on something real in life” (Givner, *Conversations* 123). This claim is supported by the numerous parallels that can and have been drawn between historical figures and Porter’s fictional characters. One must then ask why Porter felt the need to fictionalize these “real life” events (which she clearly did), especially considering that she originally went to Mexico as a journalist, not an author. Further, Porter’s research on pre-Columbian art as

well as her friendship with William Nivens shows that archaeology and anthropology offered her a gateway into the precolonial Mexico that would most influence her early works, such as *María Concepción*. It is doubly surprising then that Porter largely chose against writing in the ethnographically informed style anthropology expected. This style included a reliance on seemingly objective scientific models, which distanced the observer from the observed, thereby attempting to cleanse ethnography of subjective emotion and judgment. Porter's impulse to write fiction rather than a form of ethnography is another example of her strategy of explicitness: not only does she aestheticize Mexican Indians, she makes clear that her observations of them are not "true." As Deepika Bahri reminds us, "Representation is always fictional or partial because it must imaginatively construct its constituency (as a portrait or a 'fiction') and because it can inadvertently usurp the space of those who are incapable of representing themselves" (207). In this sense, Porter's works resist the act of usurping indigenous space by only telling stories about Mexican Indians rather than offering the an objective "truth" about them.

However, any explanation as to why Porter turned to fiction in her Mexican representations must also take into account the fact that later in life she actively blurred the line between fact and fiction in her work. According to Walsh, she eventually "attempted to claim as biographical fact almost everything that appeared in her published fiction" (xv). Rather than a negation of her fictionalizing impulse, I believe this statement shows that Porter wanted to make herself visible in the representational equation of her stories. Porter's attempt to legitimate her fiction as "lived experience" approximates the category of representation in postcolonial feminism that seeks to avoid damaging

generalizations by focusing on “an alternative mode of radical subjectivity” (Suleri 339). By claiming that the stories represent *biographical* fact, Porter is situating herself—not the subaltern—and the experiences filtered through her senses as the objects of this “radical subjectivity.” Seen in this light, her stories work to “dismantl[e] objectivism,” as Renato Rosaldo puts it, by “creat[ing] a space for ethical concerns in a territory once regarded as value-free.” Rosaldo further argues that such a space “enables the social analyst to become a social critic” (181). When subjectivity is admitted—even emphasized—so are the value judgments of the observer. Of course, such judgments are also present in a less overt way in traditional modernist ethnography, as Marianna Torgovnick among others has pointed out, leading postmodern critiques of anthropology like Rosaldo’s to call for a greater degree of narrativity that exposes the act of observing even as it records the observed. Porter, in claiming that her fiction was based solely on biographical material emphasizes the fact that recording “real-life” encounters with Others necessarily involves writing fiction. In this way, her work approaches a postmodern ethnography that doubles as social critique.

Equally arguable, and a related idea, is that Porter had begun doubting the political act of essentialization that accompanied her Rivera-like painterly style. Claiming fact in fiction could have also meant limiting these stories’ representative power to the confines of her own life, thereby diminishing the discursive violence in which representations of the Other can result. I don’t think it is a coincidence that during the time in her life when Porter described her fiction as rooted in fact her opinion of Rivera had sunk so low that she labeled him “a treacherous man and a dishonest artist” (Givner 127). Kraver has characterized Porter’s rejection of Rivera as the action of an idealist

disillusioned with the Other, a label she problematically⁸ assigns to Rivera, and with Mexico itself (“Laughing Best” 57). She argues that “Porter’s abrupt and often savage rejection of Diego Rivera and his work mirrors her rejection of Mexico” (“Laughing Best” 48). However, in my mind, the reason for Porter’s rejection of Rivera can more convincingly be explained by her concern with the increasing commercialization and dogmatism of Mexican art. As Unrue notes, “The artistic revolution itself had moved from an idealizing of Mexico’s pre-Columbian past to bold political propaganda and had shifted still again when Diego Rivera accepted a twelve thousand dollar commission from the U.S. ambassador to Mexico” to “decorate, as a gift to the people of the state of Morelos from the people of the United States, a gallery in the Palace of Cortés” (*Life of an Artist* 126). In turning to *Hacienda*, Porter’s final Mexico story, we see an author who is finally less disillusioned with Rivera—and the indigenous—as Others than with the ways in which representations of those Others had evolved.

Hacienda exemplifies Porter’s strategy of fictionalization as well as her growing uneasiness with the state of artistic representations of Mexico’s indigenous. In the summer of 1931, Porter was invited to the Hacienda Tetlapayac in the state of Hidalgo to watch Sergei Eisenstein and crew, with whom she had previously become acquainted, film a portion of the ultimately unfinished film *!Qué Viva México!*. Porter’s disillusionment with the revolution—a feeling that arguably set in after only a matter of months upon her initial arrival in Mexico—was full-blown by the time she visited this hacienda and is immediately apparent in the story she wrote about her experience there.

⁸ Though deciding who counts as an “Other” and who doesn’t is extremely problematic, it is clear that Rivera had much more in common with Porter than with the Mexican Indians. Freshly returned from years in Europe when he met Porter, Rivera was himself engaged in similar representations of Mexico’s indigenous—who were nearly, or perhaps wholly, as Other to him as they were to her by virtue of their economic status and education if not their ethnic makeup.

She opens by noting that “the names of many things are changed” (135)⁹ in postrevolutionary Mexico, while the very fact that a hacienda still exists, peons and all, shows that not much else has. Upon arriving at the hacienda, she describes the structure as both “a monastery” and “walled fortress” (151), again exposing the complicity of the Church and the state while indicting the pair’s failure to alleviate indigenous suffering. Dripping with irony, Porter goes on to comment on the clumsy cinematic device of often cutting to a portrait of Porfirio Díaz in order to show that such subservience as exists at the hacienda has long since been swept away by the revolution. Eisenstein has only agreed to such theatrics in order to gain approval of the Mexican government.

In the face of this obvious disillusionment, the evolution of *Hacienda* from essay to fictionalized story bears examination. Though published as what Porter called a “short novel” in 1934, the piece had appeared two years earlier in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. Characteristically, Porter characterized the original version as “‘almost [taking] the form of a story’ though it was ‘not fiction’ but ‘very exact’” (Stout, *Sense of the Times* 81). And with the exception of some exaggerated characters and some minor additions to storyline, the fictionalized version of “Hacienda” does to appear to be all that fictionalized—indeed, the most dramatic aspects of the story, such as the murder, were already present in the original essay.

The major difference between these two versions is that in the first, Porter offers overt critiques of Mexican politics, while in the second she both augments and embeds such critiques in her narrative. Consider the following two passages, which appeared in

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, page numbers will refer to the fictionalized version of the story, appearing in the Works Cited as Porter, Katherine Anne. *Hacienda. The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1930. 135–70.

the essay but were cut from the story version of *Hacienda*: The first describes the hacendado as “pleased and entertained to have the famous director making a picture on his hacienda...and watches him mimic wars of his own peons against oppression, symbolized by himself” (“Hacienda” 562); the second describes the dogs chasing a soldier out of jealousy, “For this soldier is part of the guard sent by the government to defend the hacienda against assault by the Agrarians, who have made Don J——’s¹⁰ life, and the life of all other hacendados in the district, a hell on earth of late years...In a pinch these soldiers might fail him, but their presence is a visible sign of government approval, for which Don J—— must pay” (“Hacienda” 564). Both passages are equivalent to the verbal explanations Rivera added to his later murals. At the expense of the art in which they appear, they explain the message of that art in a way that feels didactic, if not propagandistic. In the fictionalized version of *Hacienda*, the hacendado is still portrayed as an oppressor propped up by state power, though in a way that doesn’t disrupt the narrative. He is shown to be connected to an influential political figure named Velarde (based on Plutarco Elías Calles) who became owner of two pulque haciendas after the land repartition movement, and is both an “employer” sympathetic to the hacendado and an “honest revolutionist” (156). Porter’s revision serves to maintain the artistic integrity of her story while allowing her to remain a social critic.

In her fictionalized version, Porter is also able to be more subversive. While in the original, everyone, Porter included, accepts without question the fact that Justino shot

¹⁰ Porter used initials in the essay and pseudonyms in the fictionalized version for legal reasons; however, such thinly veiled references to historical figures have easily been uncovered by scholars.

his sister with a prop gun, the revision contains Porter¹¹ questioning why a prop gun would be loaded in the first place (150). She implicitly suggests that the account of the murder has been sanitized, and the corrido—a fiction within a fiction—lends credence to that implication without necessarily confirming it. Fiction offers Porter a space, though an explicitly subjective one, to speak for the girl, “anonymously entombed” (152) and therefore unable to defend herself.

Finally, in the time passing between the essay and story, Porter seems to have become more self-reflective and self-critical about her own representational acts. In her later description of the scenes she watched from *!Qué Viva México!* she uses the language of visual arts to a much greater degree than she did in the essay. She writes of “figures under a doom imposed by the landscape” and women looking “like dark statues walking.” In this version, Andreyev (whose name is changed from Grigory Alexandrov, the editor of the film) complains, ““so picturesque, all this...we shall be accused of dressing them [the Indians] up”” (142–43). Porter, who had dressed up as an Indian literally for at least one photograph and figuratively in at least one story in addition to “painting” numerous scenes of picturesque Indians, seems to foresee the way her work will be criticized even as she legitimates her sketches—after all, the filmmakers *didn't* dress the Indians up. However, any parallel Porter saw between her own art and that of Eisenstein's bunch would have been enough to motive an interrogation of her own artistic practices, for she saw the Russian and his assistants as false revolutionaries and unethical artists, who had, like Rivera, succumbed to commercialization and worse.

¹¹ Givner notes that *Hacienda* is “of the few stories written in the first person” (*A Life* 241), which is intriguing to me because it is one sign that Porter comes closest in this story to writing what I have argued is a form of postmodern ethnography.

Porter gives several hints that Eisenstein (called Uspensky in the story) and his company are not the genuine revolutionaries their communist labels and Russian origins would suggest. Andreyev is happy to take Kennerly's money in the form of a train ticket, urging Porter to do the same (137), and Uspensky's anticlericalism stops short at "God's own Hollywood," where he enjoys "clean, four-square business methods" (145). In fact, though Porter has so carefully cut out all other overtly political material from her essay, she *adds* a long paragraph to the story detailing the various communist groups in Russia and Mexico paying Uspensky to create a film to their liking (145). These Russian communists may not be capitalists at heart, but they are in practice.¹²

In this sense, they are aligned with Rivera in Porter's mind, and for good reason. In the relatively recently compiled, yet still incomplete *!Qué Viva México!*, Alexandrov's narration credits "the great Mexican painters Diego Rivera, David Siqueiros, and Jose Orozco" with being the filmmakers' "guides and teachers." In *Hacienda*, Rivera is obviously one of the targets of Porter's sweeping critique of revolutionary arts, as her description of Uspensky betrays: he "sat in his monkey-suit of striped overalls, his face like a superhumanly enlightened monkey's now well overgrown with a simian beard. He had a monkey attitude towards life" (153). He is, in effect, one of "Diego's monkeys," and that term has taken on a negative meaning for Porter. It is one thing to paint bold new images and be accused by critics of rendering human "monkeys." It is another to take on a "monkey attitude," with the latter connoting an irresponsible relationship with art.

However, it is significant that Porter, though she has questioned the type of aestheticization she and Rivera both engaged in, does not deny the power of such

¹² In a final irony—one of which Porter may have been unaware when writing "Hacienda" but would have enjoyed—the section of Eisenstein's film entitled "Revolutionary Mexico" remained unfinished because the filmmakers ran out of money (*!Qué Viva México!*).

“strategic essentialism” in the end. A “dark youth,” of whom Porter clearly disapproves, tells her that he is “devoted...to fresco painting, ‘only modern...like Rivera’s, the method, but not old-fashioned style like his” (168). Betancourt—the boy’s tutor—earlier in the story links modernity with affluence (154), and by extrapolation in this paradigm “modern” art is profitable art. Through Kennerly (who ostensibly is commenting on film), Porter succinctly sums up the contradictory imperatives imposed on Rivera under the constraints of government and then individual commissions: it “must be done by a certain date, it must be art, of course, that’s taken for granted, and it must be a hit” (141). Though Porter realized that the pressures of business inevitably plaguing the popular arts of film and mural made it difficult to sustain an “old fashioned” style for long, she seemed to still value Rivera’s less popular, pre-Columbian style and the possibility of a hybrid society it enabled. Her reference to the “faded fresco relating the legend of pulque” (165) marks an awareness that in the absence of Mexican artists fusing the precolonial past with the revolutionary present, the hacienda owner can appropriate that past for his own means—to keep his peons submissive and enslaved.

The extent of Porter’s disillusionment with Mexican art becomes especially clear when Betancourt pronounces that the murdered Indian girl is better off dead in such a place as the hacienda. Based on Porter’s Greenwich Village friend Best-Maugard, who first introduced Porter to indigenous art, Betancourt is now part of a “staff of professional propagandists” (146) who is callous to the human cost of the girl’s death, as is the rest of the crew: Kennerly worries about being sued by her family and other members lament the delay in filming it will cause. This art—which is meant to expose the suffering of the peon—cannot take the time to mourn the death of an actual member of that class. What’s

more, the filmmakers hope to profit from the incident by no longer having to tell Justino, who had ruined several shots by smiling during the film's death scenes, that death "is not funny" (169). Apparently, the filmmakers do not actually believe the line they state in the beginning of the portion in *!Qué Viva México!* that documents the Day of the Dead: "man's triumph over death through mockery of it." Worst of all, Kennerly realizes that the crew shot a scene two weeks ago that exactly mirrored the murder. He says, "the strangest thing is, we have to make that scene again, it didn't turn out so well, and look, my God, we had it happening really, and nobody thought of it then! Then was the time. We could have got a close-up of the girl, really dead, and real blood running down Justino's face" (163). Porter portrays this desire to capture "authentic" violence as repulsive but is implicated in this action since she too is making art from the stuff of real human tragedy—the actor Felix Balderas having actually shot his sister the morning before she arrived at Hacienda Tetlapayac. In choosing to write about the murder in the first place, Porter mirrors Kennerly, but where he is merely opportunistic, she seems painfully self-conscious of her ethical position.

The ambivalence of Porter's position as one who wants to speak for the Other but who can only do so problematically is embodied in the pose Porter describes herself as taking in the original version of "Hacienda" as she reflects on the injustices that continue to plague Mexico's Indians: "I wrap myself in a blanket and sit on the balcony, huddled, knees under chin" ("Hacienda" 566). Her pose is remarkably similar to that of María Concepción when that character finally lets her sorrow overtake her: "drawing her rebozo over her head, she bowed her forehead on her updrawn knees, and sat there in deadly silence and immobility" (13). The hacienda portion of *!Qué Viva México!* also begins

with an indigenous man in the same position, a position that is then echoed by an Indian woman just before she is raped by a guest of the hacendado, the first in a chain of events that will lead to her fiancé's tragic death. This posturing would seem then to be Porter's attempt to show her solidarity with the subaltern. Yet Stout points out that "her placement on the balcony—though it may signal her detachment from the decadent atmosphere of the hacienda—is clearly another restatement of the emblematic scene Pratt reads as remnant of the imperialist gaze" ("South from the South" 31). No matter what she does, Porter will always be above and apart from the workers she seeks to represent. I believe it is her awareness of this problem that leads her to question the ethics of representation in general in this story. Porter's decision to leave the hacienda before filming resumes—and soon after, Mexico—seems to signal her choice to abandon the attempt to speak for the subaltern. If the hacienda in the postmodern *All the Pretty Horses* reflects a nostalgic version of the U.S. cowboy lifestyle, the hacienda in Porter's modern rendition serves as a reminder that representations of Mexican Others in American fiction cannot be other than flawed.

Conclusion: Mexico and Beyond

In most ways, the three authors I have discussed in this thesis—Cormac McCarthy, Jack Kerouac, and Katherine Anne Porter—couldn't be more different. In fact, at first, the only thing that seemed to unite them in my mind was the loose criteria that rendered them appropriate for my topic in the first place: they were all twentieth-century American authors writing about Mexico. However, closer inspection reveals that these authors share a stylistic, not just geographic, commonality: they all write visually-oriented prose. This probably shouldn't be surprising considering that the century in which they wrote was largely an optical one. During the colonial era, the written word, in the form of travel narratives and letters, dominated encounters with the Other; by contrast, twentieth-century Americans encountered Others through modern art, motion pictures, television, and visual advertising (often promoting "exotic" locales). From overtly abstract to seemingly real, the language of visual media became less obviously representational and more focused on inciting desire throughout the twentieth century, a developmental pattern that roughly corresponds with the use of Mexico in Porter's, Kerouac's, and McCarthy's fiction. Porter draws on the highly conceptualized images of Diego Rivera's modernist murals in her stories to make a political point; Kerouac portrays a fantasy land of a Mexico that is filtered through the lens of simulations; and McCarthy creates a Mexico that largely reflects (and advertises) his U.S.-centered philosophical and social concerns.

A version of this pattern could also be applied to modern and postmodern reactions to Otherness more broadly. By triangulating these authors, I have been able to explore the ways in which representations of Others are informed by the intersections of

consumer culture and image consumption, arguing that such renderings have become more problematic in the postmodern moment of late capitalism, which is marked by hypersimulation, an insatiable desire for the new, and self-reflexivity. The modern emphasis on differentiating the self and Other, or what might be termed an explicit treatment of Otherness, seems at first glance to have given way in postmodernism to a deconstruction of the Self and Other subject positions. However, as my discussion of McCarthy has shown, the self-reflexive nature of postmodernism that allows for responsible, accountable encounters with Others can also result in the near replacement of the Other with the Self. Though postmodern authors may have abandoned modern attempts to speak *for* the Other, they have not stopped representing the Other completely; therefore, on the one hand what seems to be the most ethical use of Mexico possible on the other elides—or, rather, engulfs—Mexico at the same time.

However, one of the aims of my thesis has also been to problematize the dividing line between modern and postmodern reactions to Otherness. Therefore, it would be overly simplistic to characterize Katherine Anne Porter, for example, as being explicit in her representation of Otherness at the loss of being self-reflexive. As my last chapter demonstrated, Porter is arguably the most obviously self-conscious of all three authors in the way that she questions the ethics of representation. Though Kerouac demonstrates self-consciousness about how sociopolitical constructs function within the United States, he doesn't seem to realize that he too is complicit in constructing a version of Mexico that serves to maintain some of the very power balances and conventions he's seeking to tear down. Significantly, the search for authenticity that takes him to Mexico in the first place is really something that can ultimately only be found within the Self, not an Other.

This is similar to McCarthy in that by going to Mexico in his fiction he is able to find out something about the U.S. psyche and soul.

This is not to say that McCarthy lacks a keen awareness of the problematic traditional use of Mexico in American fiction. Actually, the opposite is true. He seems so intent on deconstructing, if not correcting, the missteps previous American authors took in Mexico that his Mexico becomes a space dominated by self-searching. Ultimately, while such introspection is equivalent in some ways with Porter's, the difference lies in the degree to which these authors ever endeavor to confront Otherness on its own terms, as hard as those terms may be to define. I have argued in this thesis that while Porter attempts to represent the Other, doubts herself, and retreats, McCarthy in some ways doesn't quite make the attempt, and Kerouac falls somewhere between the two.

Ultimately, it may seem fruitless to make a distinction between trying and not trying if the end result in both cases is that representation of the Other is futile. However, this is too easy a conclusion. Writing of any kind demands both authors and readers who are willing to step beyond the boundaries of themselves to attempt a connection at something outside—something that in loose terms is equivalent to the Other that Mexico stands for in this thesis. Thus, in broad terms, it is never an option to abandon the Other completely. If that is the case, then the question we as scholars of American literature must concern ourselves with is not so much *how* an author represents Otherness (abstractly, “realistically,” or some other way), but *to what end* that author does so—to further an agenda of the self or to attempt an empathetic connection with the Other, even if that connection will always be flawed to some degree. And this question, smacking of authorial intentionality, is extremely difficult to ask in the postmodern moment.

One of the main values of this thesis then is to provide a framework upon which such a question might rest, however uncomfortably. In my discussion, “Mexico” has not been used to denote a land, its people, and culture(s), all of which underwent dramatic change over the century of American literature I have examined here. Instead, I have used the word *Mexico* to refer to a very specific discursive formation within the tradition of American literature, and this formation offers a stable point of reference—a unified Other—against which the reactions of these various authors may be measured. Thus despite the impossibility of knowing Porter’s, Kerouac’s, and McCarthy’s intentions, it becomes possible to analyze the *effect* of their intentions through a comparison of the Mexicos they write into their fiction.

This framework is one that could be profitably exported to other comparative studies as well. For example, Mauricio Trillo has called for a look at the “Mexican side of the equation,” specifically referring to the two-way cultural exchange between American and Mexican authors during the early twentieth century (225), though the study of such an exchange taking place in more recent years also merits discussion. Future work might look at the way in which Mexican intellectuals and authors have responded to both the discursive formation of Mexico imposed by their northern neighbors and to the United States itself as a marker of Otherness.

My study, especially the first two chapters, has pointed to a distinct psychological dividing line between Mexico and the United States. Despite the border location of McCarthy’s novels as well as his characters’ frequent crossings and their liminal identities, the U.S.-Mexican border still functions as a significant separating point in *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy. The intellectual space south of this line provides

a setting in which postmodern questions about identity, time, and social constructs can be addressed. As for Kerouac, his fictional counterpart, Sal, in *On the Road* finds a measure of authenticity by appropriating various forms of Otherness as found in ethnic communities north of the border. However, it is not until he crosses the line into Mexico that he misrecognizes simulation-informed stereotypes as “IT” among Others who can’t assert their own identities, allowing Sal to be “authentically” American in a way not available to him in the United States. Ours is an era when the U.S.-Mexican border has become irrelevant in many practical ways, even as it has been called into question and complicated by scholars such as Gloria Anzaldua and several since her. Those who support the physical fence being constructed across its distance are reacting to the fact that the geopolitical purpose of such a border has “failed” to separate citizens of differing nations or to protect cultural and linguistic homogeneity. But the psychological strength of this border has, if anything, grown with recent debates over national security and immigration. My thesis then is of value to scholars of border studies in that it offers insight into the formation of the distinct intellectual category that is Mexico in the American mind—a category that I would argue remains influential, if not dominate, even in the most hybrid of communities.

My discussion has also focused on another type of border crossing; that is, the crossing between lines delineating genres. In this light, easy periodization of the three authors I have looked at is again problematized. Working backwards from McCarthy, these writers would seem to become more experimental—more postmodern in some ways—in their transgression of traditional literary categories. McCarthy’s work, despite its refusal of some thematic conventions, remains squarely grounded in the realm of the

fictional (or historical) novel, while Kerouac marries the fictional novel with confessional autobiography. Porter goes further still by claiming alternately that her work represents pure fiction and biographical fact, melding journalism and authorial craft into a genre that could arguably be called a form of postmodern ethnography. It seems that such a varied, hybrid approach is helpful, or even necessary, in telling any sort of “truth” about an Other because it makes visible both the Self and Other in the representational equation. More critics might cross interpretive boundaries by reading past the limitations of formalism and its reliance on the symbol in order to see modernists like Porter in fresh ways.

I have also paid close attention to the way in which time is configured during these three encounters with Otherness. McCarthy’s move to Mexico seems motivated in part by an inability to capture contemporary American experience. The Other becomes a site that enables reflection that is otherwise impossible in a media saturated, image-choked society, where the fact that everything has already been said frustrates the imperative to tell something new. Meanwhile, Kerouac places the Others Sal meets in Mexico on a separate temporal plane from him in order for them to serve as a source of authenticity, free of the trappings of civilization. Porter, in her figuration of the indigenous character María Concepción, who is both precolonial and capitalistically savvy, is the only one to share the same temporal boundaries as the Other she encounters, and her writing is characterized by a history that is “filled by the presence of the now,” and therefore resists the deferral of revolution (Benjamin 261). The complex ways in which conceptions of time mediate identity and alterity, in the U.S.-Mexico context and others, bear further examination.

Finally, I hope to have complicated the temporal, theoretical, and ethical positions from which all three authors have encountered Otherness as signified by Mexico.

Therefore I have not answered definitively the question of whether Porter's pose as an Indian in the photograph with which this thesis began should be read as modern or postmodern. Instead, I hope that her Mexican representations might be seen as bridging that problematic divide. But more importantly, I hope to have communicated that the Porter who peers out from under a rebozo produced representations, however flawed, that in the end sought for an empathetic connection with a people very different from herself.

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