The Consumption of Simulacra: Deconstructing Otherness in
Katherine Anne Porter’s Mexican Conceptual Space

by Travis Hubbs

From the earliest days of border contact, Mexico has been an unavoidable cultural
presence in America; its literary conception north of the border persists as a battleground of
identity where numerous forces contend to forge meaning. American writers of literature about
Mexico oversee an assembly line whose products generate for consumers an endless supply of
variations on a theme. This theme—manifest in American fiction produced since the mid-
nineteenth century—continues simultaneously to create, to revise, and to embed into the minds
of Americans a discursive concept of their southern neighbor. America remains constantly
engaged in this process of identity construction, through which Americans recognize
“Americanness” as the second half of a binary differentiation that subjugates “Mexicanness” as
its opposite. This paper explores the ways in which Katherine Anne Porter’s fiction uniquely
supplements cultural narratives of Mexicanness, Americanness, and the implications of their co-
existence. Porter’s textual relationship with Mexico exists as a complicated, yet revealing
anomaly among hegemonic articulations of what the existence of Mexico entails for the
existence of America.

The conceptual existence of either nation, of course, depends on the language that
conveys it. Language—the only instrument for generating meaning—relies on a system of
semantic differences; therefore, the construction of meaning and identity can never be a positive
construction. Identity functions through language and, in turn, language functions through a

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1 In a given society, power produces, enforces, and controls a subject’s identity through discursive representation
designed to subjugate it at the level of language. (Foucault)

2 This crucial notion of hegemony emphasizes the ways in which elites constitute and reconstitute power through
articulations of ideology dispersed within a society in order to manufacture consent. (Gramsci)
negative structure of semiotic comparisons and contrasts.\(^3\) In other words, identity can only exist alongside its opposite. Deciding what constitutes the nature of Americanness first depends on being able to decide what exactly does not constitute the nature of Americanness. The conception of Porter’s national identity is paradoxically dependent on the prior existence of a counterpoint identity.\(^4\) The ambiguity in her fiction accordingly reflects the ambiguity of identity itself. To describe this ambiguity I examine Porter’s relationship with her Mexican conceptual space in the context of an economic metaphor that situates the consumer-Self in opposition to the consumed-Other. Porter has no choice but to construct her self-identity using the tools of language; she cannot escape the simulacrum that replaces individuals with national consumers, and her fiction becomes a part of the larger national mythology that separates the United States from Mexico—the bourgeois consumer from the Other consumed. The process of self-definition depends less on Porter’s conscious decisions than it does on the fact that society’s language is structured such that consumers cannot make the choice to renounce consumption—no more, at least, than they can renounce language or economics. Knowing this, yet unable to do anything about it, Porter transfers her version of consumer anxiety onto characters who, in turn, transfer it onto the landscape, the people, and the society within the Mexican conceptual space. The way in which she manages to attain a status as both consumer and consumed constitutes primarily a psychosocial and psycholinguistic phenomenon that provides us with an informative microcosm of America’s conceptual relationship with Mexico as a whole.

Because she attempts to escape her status as consumer, Porter’s Mexican conceptual space is more nuanced and complicated than that of other modernist writers. The binary differentiation of identity, however, is a process shared by all architects of representation. Thus,

\(^3\) (Derrida)
\(^4\) Self-consciousness is engendered in the moments during which its existence is postulated by the self-consciousness of another. (Hegel)
before I further explicate my theoretical framework and apply it specifically to Porter, it may be useful to delineate a certain category of “border literature.” This operational categorization will serve as the historicized textual matrix\(^5\) wherein we might more specifically bracket Porter’s participation in the production and consumption of culture.\(^6\)

Border literature, for our purposes, will entail any narrative that depicts a Mexican conceptual space in which two distinct, fictional espousals of identity vie for cultural jurisdiction. When the United States signed the 1821 treaty with Spain—setting the national boundary lines that would determine the contested areas of the Mexican-American War—British colonial rule lingered fresh in the nation’s consciousness. Unlike Britain, the United States “did not expand to obtain subservient colonies; it transformed acquisitions into new states with the same privileges and immunities of the original thirteen… Rebellious subjects menaced other empires, but equal citizens—however distant from the seat of government—added strength to the nation.” Expansionists, largely convinced of America’s overall superiority to Natives and Mexicans, marched westward in an effort to consolidate economic efficacy and ethnic purity. Adding territory, opening and protecting markets, and propagating neo-Jeffersonian ideology, 1840s “enterprising Americans would defy… boundaries and wrest land and resources from those with a tenuous hold on them.” Technological advancement effectively shrank the world and made it possible to sustain an empire, and instantaneously to communicate the economic and neo-liberal justifications for its existence.\(^7\)

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\(^5\) Like Baker’s Blues matrix, my functional use of the term contextualizes culture and literature as “a complex, reflexive enterprise… a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit” (Baker).

\(^6\) The goal here is that of the conflict theorist who seeks to link a literary understanding of textual interpretation and meaning production together with social theory’s demarcation of oppositional forces within a given society, since “textuality is never enough” (Hall).

\(^7\) (Hietala 57-62)
Here it makes sense to categorize the narrative of America’s trek beyond the Appalachians as a “border tale” because, following Hutner’s logic, “in understanding how the literature of internal borders invokes that of external ones… we also develop the possibilities of a more dynamically comparatist reading of American borders.” By connecting the regionalist impulse of the nineteenth century American middle-class with the nationalist agenda of Manifest Destiny, we get the image of a fledgling nation afraid of its own deterioration from within; as a remedy for this fear, the country’s conscience called upon a bourgeois border literature to harness its anxieties about emergent nationhood into a search for “that otherness it would banish within its own boundaries.”

An operational definition of the Mexican conceptual space, then, might be akin to King’s notion of the functional usage of variations of the term “modern” in the humanities and social sciences: “the very concepts of the modern and modernity can be taken as foundational to the extent that they determine the nature of the knowledge produced, the temporal, spatial, and conceptual boundaries which govern its construction, as well as the identity of its producers.” Framing ideas, values, and cultures in the context of geographic space— with the rise of globalized capitalism— offered elites the practical power of signifying nature. The Mexican conceptual space is a complex geographical expression of “the power to construct knowledge but also the parameters and paradigms within which that knowledge is made legitimate.” The utilization of a Mexican conceptual space provides not only the widespread construction and typification of the Other, but also a spatial forum onto which can be fixed the qualities of Otherness that distinguish it from the home space.

8 (Hutner 89-108)
9 (King)
10 “Ordinary people doing ordinary things in the midst of a world populated with Others of a similar nature doing similar things constitute the ground of typification… The idea of a limiting concept may be transposed into an
Keeping in mind spatial, individual, and typified Otherness, we can attribute a substantial portion of the roots of anti-Mexican racism to America’s pre-twentieth century response to its own internal fractions and political insecurities. The dime novel, in particular, provided a quick and easy way for the American imagination to create and broadcast a border realm that both threatened and secured the safety and virtue of the home space. Dime novels began to champion nationalist forays into imperialism—the Mexican-American War represents America’s first such foray—and supported their call to arms with a brand of cultural essentialism that articulated Mexicans in particular as weak, impure, uncivilized, and incapable of “Americanization,” whatever that means. After America’s victory over its southern neighbor and the subsequent outbreak of mindless violence spearheaded by the Texas Rangers, it was clear that “American republican government was not a government for all races and all colors,” even as expansionist rhetoric continued to endorse the claim that “the American advance would bring freedom and civilization to all peoples.”

Reflecting the ethnocentricity of the times, Anglo-American border literature endured a correlative phase of protestant self-righteousness and racism. By and large, the Anglo-American literary testimony on Mexico returned a verdict of ambivalence. Stereotypes and mythologies thrived in the Mexican conceptual space throughout the nineteenth century, but the complexities of Mexican society repeatedly confounded the narrative logic of nationalist writers. The confounding result was that border literature of this period grappled to reconcile its fascination with the Spanish gentry and its repulsion of the uncivilized Indians and mixed-blood Mexicans, and to legitimate its abandonment of Puritanism for the sake of portraying the sensual exoticism of Mexico’s women. Frontier writers “were both dazzled by a display of elegant leisure which

ontological given. In these terms, all acts of recognition are rescues of identity and specificity from the anonymous ground of presence” (Natanson).

1 (Horsman 246-247)
they had never encountered before and at the same time constrained to express, in the name of egalitarian democracy, a disapproval of an hereditary and oppressive aristocratic class” and, of course, Mexico’s lower classes supplied the outlet where these writers “gave vent to all their characteristic prejudices.”

This profound swelling of countrywide anxiety and insecurity culminated in Turner’s century-end deliverance of his “frontier thesis” to audiences at the World’s Fair in Chicago. His assertion rested on the popular belief that America’s exceptional nature stemmed from the rugged individualism that the frontier engendered in the hearts and minds of the pioneer. It provided “an American past as grand as that of England or any continental power, an American landscape as spectacular as any in the world,” while systematically disguising its support of a racist and ethnocentrist “contradictory character of individualism, senseless yet essential nature of violence, and the ambiguous role of the exploitation of natural resources.”

Such panicked disingenuousness perhaps has its roots in a certain national claustrophobia—the generative laboratory in which America could expand into greater manifestations of Americanness had previously been the frontier but, as Turner highlights, the 1890 census had declared the frontier closed. The definition of Americanness was metaphorically set; there was no more room for its connotative growth. It was assumed that “American dreaming” needed to continue—but where, asked Turner and company, could the ritualistic “fall line” be placed if it was no longer the frontier? Encounters with strangeness, with ostensible regeneration, were, in a way, “offshored” to the geographical space of the Other.

By the time Katherine Anne Porter sat poised to take the literary stage, writers like Whitman had converted the prevailing attitude toward the Mexican conceptual space from

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12 (Robinson 6)
13 (M. Ridge 12)
14 (Bruce-Novoa)
blatant contempt to a condescending romanticization that further obscured social realities. Whitman declared that it was time to renounce the “illusion-compound” of past American literature about Mexico.15 In place of said illusion, Whitman contributed a body of work that adopted a primitivist portrayal of the cultural contributions of the old Hispanic Southwest. The approach of the twentieth century heralded a waning faith in the merits of scientific progress and turned national attention to the impending effects of a globalized economy. Accordingly, a more nostalgic American border literature began to praise Mexicans for “being closer to the essential rhythms of life”. This reaction against the machine of modernity, however, unintentionally succumbed to the same allure of essentialism. Anglo-American writers of this era juxtaposed American characters with Mexican settings to critique the American type in his or her modern flaws against a backdrop of “the quaint, the grotesque, or the stereotypic” idylls of elemental Mexican life. The twentieth century, however, moved toward more realism and compassion in its portrayals of the Mexican conceptual space, and Robinson notes that, indeed, this describes “the case of treatments by Katherine Anne Porter.”16

But what sets Porter apart from her predecessors, other than her adoration of Mexico and her particularly assiduous devotion to its welfare? Does ostensible intentionality liberate her from the national effort to manufacture consent to an accepted recognition of the Other? What can we learn—from her Mexican conceptual space and the Otherness it contains—about identity politics and international relations?

Answers to these questions may become more accessible if we place Porter, her predecessors, and her successors, within a particular theoretical framework to describe the procession of discourse within the textual matrix of Anglo-American border literature as a

15 (Whitman 402)
16 (Robinson 11-14)
whole. This theoretical framework first locates the consumer-author on the universal plane, then the national, and finally the individual.

The universal need to identify an Other—in more rigorous terms than a mere Hegelian phenomenology—can be illustrated by Lacan’s notion of the “mirror stage,” in which the Self instinctually divides his individual self from his societal self. Lacan identifies the realm of the whole Self as the realm of the “imaginary,” and the realm of the split as the realm of the “symbolic,” which includes language. A lifelong journey ensues, during which an individual tries to use language to regain the sense of unity and wholeness that must have existed in the womb. Texts, narratives, and representations supply the media through which we attempt to construct external images of whole Selves that satisfy the internal—and therefore inaccessible—desire to occupy a home space within which we may achieve unity, safety, and transcendence. These external images, or constructions of identity, are preceded by a sign system that orients the protolinguistic experience of the speaker to the realm of the symbolic where linguistic and social structures must inexorably obey the rules of representation.

The notion of “imagined communities” builds a useful theoretical bridge to connect the universal psycholinguistic plane to the national political plane. The birth of a nation is the birth of an imagined community that springs from darkness and must forget the experience that precedes it. The inaugural experience of nationhood resembles the profound change in consciousness produced by puberty and all of the internal alterations stimulated thereof—this

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17 After an infant looks at a mirror, he can no longer think of himself as whole, since he now understands that to look upon a body apart from the “mind” is also to look upon an Other. (Lacan)
18 The subject is split by language, “for it is the signifier intended to designate as a whole the effects of the signified, in that the signifier conditions them by its presence as a signifier” (Lacan).
19 “Writing represents-orient the signifying process into specific networks or spaces” (Kristeva).
20 “I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—an imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign… limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations… sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm” (Anderson).
paradigm shift carries with it a certain amnesia that must be supplemented by “a huge accumulation of documentary evidence (birth certificates, diaries, report cards, letters, medical records, and the like) which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory.”

National ideology then takes the place of Lacan’s imaginary and constitutes a representation of the relationship between individuals and reality. Individuals recognize themselves as such when they respond with language to the call of an ideological state apparatus, such as literature. Thus, the individual identifies the forgotten womb with the remembered home space, imaginary unity with symbolic home space, and internal transcendence with external safety. The employment of family rhetoric such as “Uncle Sam” and “fraternity,” coupled with the charting of nations’ ages, further reifies the marriage of individuality to nationality. The Mexican conceptual space provides a template for the construction of the Other upon which writers project their anxieties about never achieving wholeness, and within which they are able to safely barricade themselves and their nation-family from the Otherness that threatens to thwart the successful preservation of the home space that harbors the communal substitute for individuality. The border essentially acts as a national mirror that further complicates, catalyzes, and makes permanent, the dissociative procession of self-division.

In the global capitalist economy, home spaces and imagined communities function as linguistic and ideological differentiations calculated not by what they represent, but rather what they do not represent. It is my assertion that the cultural phenomenon of semiotic representation

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21 “Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, identity (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it can not be ‘remembered,’ must be narrated… Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity—product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century—engenders the need for a narrative of ‘identity’” (Anderson).

22 “The duplicate mirror-structure of ideology ensures simultaneously: 1. The interpellation of ‘individuals’ as subjects; 2. Their subjection to the subject; 3. The mutual recognition of subjects and Subject, the subjects’ recognition of each other, and finally the subject’s recognition of himself; 4. The absolute guarantee that everything really is so, and that on condition that the subjects recognize what they are and behave accordingly, everything will be alright” (Althusser).
can function within articulations of hegemony as one or more of the following three options: as production-signs constructed by consumer-Selves, as production-signifiers constructed by consumed-Others, or as consumed- Others that do not actually exist outside of their signifiers and bear no relation to reality other than the extent to which their representations are taken for granted.\footnote{The 3-part “sign” consists of the signifier, the concept which it signifies, and the unity of the two which produces the sign (Saussure). The “transcendental referent,” manifestly non-existent, precedes the sign as that which the sign purports to represent (Derrida).} The Mexican conceptual space functions as the sign for which the Other is signifier and its Otherness is signified.

Anglo-American border literature traditionally fits into the last category of consumed- Others bearing no relation to reality. If the Mexican conceptual space— at some unspecified, perhaps pre-Columbian point in history— originated as production-signs that pretended loyalty to a referent, then its nineteenth century derivative marks a decided departure from maintaining referential mimesis. Because internal and external representations of imagined communities, home spaces, and Otherness, carried the dogmatic weight of the sacred, the linear evolution of representation becomes self-referential. Writers monopolized both the production and the distribution of representation, thereby guaranteeing its contiguous consumption by fellow consumers. Observation of Mexican “reality” thus becomes irrelevant and meaningless, since its worth is determined by the degree to which consumers equate it with the always already-existing Mexican conceptual space. The eventual result is a simulacrum of mythology that obliterates the gap between signifier and signified, between imaginary and symbolic, and converts the represented to the real. If the subaltern\footnote{The subaltern is the silenced Other. “There is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself” (Spivak).} can speak for itself, it is only through an utterance that must first pass the market’s inspection or, successively, through an historical unearthing and deconstruction of the discourses that originally delegated its projection of Otherness and the
irrevocable silence coupled with it. The subjects-in-oppression and the spaces they occupy are consumed and digested by the simulacrum of consumers’ hegemonic representations— the prior existence of that which precedes Otherness having been lost within the destructive trajectory of anthropology. Mexico, therefore, does not exist apart from the manifestations of spatial metaphor that designate it as an eternally imagined community signifying Otherness. 

The pre-Porter simulacrum of Mexican space furnishes the opportunity to identify what may be called a collective familial ideology of form that is distinctive to its capitalist mode of production. An ideology of form imposes imaginative limits on an author or a text based on the historical circumstances that characterize the dominant mode of production in which they arise. If we apprehend history in its effects, then the operation of formal aesthetics within a narrative can reveal the dynamics of history’s antagonistic discourses of social classes and the individuals that occupy them. The anatomies and outcomes of these discourses effectively denote dialectical evidence of the national, international, and societal transformations that they anticipate. In this way, we can observe the tectonics at work behind the chafing of class struggles with respect to ideological movements manifest in the narratives of Anglo-American border literature before, during, and after Katherine Anne Porter.

Porter’s predecessors— exemplified here by John Rollin Ridge and Stephen Crane— are less autobiographical, less self-aware writers who engage more overtly in the establishment and consumption of the Mexican conceptual space. Writing nearly a century before Porter, Ridge worked under the anxiety of lawlessness during the California Gold Rush. His dime novel seeks

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25 The notion of the simulacrum signals the end “of all of metaphysics. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. No more imaginary coextensivity: rather, genetic miniaturisation is the dimension of simulation. The real is produced from miniaturised units, from matrices, memory banks and command models— and with these it can be reproduced an infinite number of times” (Baudrillard).

26 “…our discovery of a text’s symbolic efficacity must be oriented by a formal description which seeks to grasp it as a determinate structure of still properly formal contradictions” (Jameson). For my purposes, I appropriate Jameson’s term “ideology of form” more loosely to mean the complex demarcation of oppositional hegemonic forms over time, rather than the strict economic determinism of a traditional Marxian analysis of class struggle.
to stabilize, naturalize, and encourage an idea of Americanness that can bring the chaos of the West under control. His is an external investigation of the Mexican conceptual space that takes as its referent a folk legend that perhaps never even existed. Murieta is the result—a Mexican bandit, a savage, a romantic idealization of the horrors that result when Americans stop being American and allow the Other to breed chaos. National unity, Ridge seems to suggest, is the only answer that can control violent criminals from other cultures. Murieta, though, is not devoid of the duality and ambiguity that characterize Porter’s construction of the Other. Ridge certainly applies blatant stereotypes to Murieta and naturalizes them by claiming that the character’s “individual history is a part of the most valuable history of the state”. On the other hand, Ridge also works to exonerate Murieta’s character from his stereotypes by justifying his actions through pointing out the social inequality that lead the bandit to suffer “at the hands of the Americans”.  

Ultimately, though, Murieta’s duality is merely the result of Ridge’s marketing strategy to appeal both to American consumers and Mexican consumers. Thus, the pre-modern consumer’s access to reality is obscured, along with the Other’s status as consumed, and Murieta remains nothing more than a way for Americans to imagine the dangerous repercussions of not living up to the “melting pot” ideal that is supposed to define their society. Myth-making is the foundation of the Mexican conceptual simulacrum—the geographical disappearance of the frontier perhaps being its spark. Porter’s self-awareness certainly places her above Ridge’s myth-making; although the psychological necessity of the Other persists in her stories, her attempts at deconstruction, demystification, and honesty can be considered authentic.

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27 (J. R. Ridge 7, 10)  
28 “Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things… But this is the point: we are no longer dealing here with a theoretical mode of representation: we are dealing with this particular image, which is given for this particular signification. Mythical speech is made of a material so as to make it suitable for communication: it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presuppose a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance” (Barthes).
Crane, unlike Ridge, does not try to incite Americans to control the chaotic Other. His naturalist style is important here because it works to associate Mexico with the laws of nature that exist in a realm that cannot be controlled by the laws of man. For Crane, Mexico is still chaotic, but it is no longer criminal. Mexico, like nature, does not answer to petty human inventions like the idea of criminality. Thus, the brash frontier spirit of his risk-taking American characters will fail in the face of what they cannot control; their dominance is impoverished and replaced by doubt and anxiety about their ability to survive and maintain their individual and national identities in the anarchic conceptual space of the Other. Mexico in Crane’s stories is consumed as a dangerous thrill that validates the consumer’s status as consumer, and the Other’s status as consumed. Stories like “The Wise Men” and “Five White Mice” are presented as internal investigations of the Mexican conceptual space, but they still contain no referential pretense—they comprise the simulacrum’s own referents. The space is naturally uncivilized, chaotic, and unpredictable, and it serves as a test site where American consumers can relieve their anxieties about the inadequacies of consumer civility. This conception of Otherness is comparable to Morrison’s metaphorical description of the atmosphere of Otherness in *The Bluest Eye*: “A familiar plant and an exotic one. A harmless one and a dangerous one. One produces a nourishing berry; one delivers toxic ones. But they both thrived here together.” The difference, of course, is the greater geographical space denoted by the word “here.” The American literary search for womb-like safety in a conceptual home space knows only the boundaries between nations, and its insatiable consumption of spaces of Otherness refuses to recognize the prospect of coexistence through mutual recognition of the Otherness of the Self and the Selfness of the Other.

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29 (Morrison)
Deferring this mutual recognition, both Crane and Ridge use stereotypes, nationalist rhetoric, and mythological signification to reinforce and naturalize the Other as a way of validating their own identities— they are both consumers of Mexico, and both fall short of Porter’s conscious critique of American penetration into the Mexican conceptual space. Ridge constructs the identity of the Mexican Other for its consumption as a national team-building exercise for the purpose of home space purification. Crane constructs the identity of the Mexican Other for its consumption as a tour guide to validate the separate natures of the American consumer and the Mexican consumed, thereby affirming the home space’s safety in its separation from the dangers of Otherness.

Porter’s Mexican conceptual space, on the other hand, is the conception of both an internal and an external investigation, and it is saturated with the modernist tendencies of a consumer who has become overly self-aware of the process of ravenous consumption and its effects. The onset of modernity— signaled by (but not exclusive to) industrialization, a boom in technology, and the impending threat of globalization— significantly separates Porter’s identity crisis from that of her predecessors. The speed and immediacy of Porter’s new atmosphere, while effectively shrinking the globe and making individual identity inseparable from global identity, initially begins to foster feelings of renewal and possibility. National societies, however, could no longer afford to allow individuals to define themselves in non-global, non-economic terms. After all— interdependence would replace individuality, the global scale would replace the local scale, and technology would begin, simultaneously, both to expedite and to threaten socioeconomic stability. Porter’s initial enthusiasm about the goodness of speed, of global proximity, and of America’s role as the harbinger of modernity abroad would soon buckle. Perhaps— with modernity’s increased psychic and social repression of desire—
geographic space as the generative area where a person might self-define, or self-identify, are revealed to her as illusory. Her characters offer to shoulder the burden of anxiety, and their stories suggest the complexity of Porter’s choice, the choice that all modern individuals must make with respect to foreign nations in a globalized world: consume or be consumed. Porter chooses—between ideologue and modernist, between societal Self and societal Other, between consumer and consumed—and almost succeeds in creating a representation of Mexico free of projection. The result of her choice is the pinnacle of American representations of Mexico because she makes clear what may be thought of as her “simultaneous recognition of nationhood and alienation from it,” thereby identifying herself with the marginal Other. At the end of the day, however, the sense of alienation that she purports to share with Otherness must clash with the identity she shares with her concept of nationhood; essentially, her alienation feeds and sustains her concept of Mexicanness because it is that which enables her to return to her conceptual Americanness. Porter’s Mexican conceptual space is ambiguous, dualistic, and problematic—three attributes symptomatic of her own identification anxiety.

Like Ridge and Crane, Porter consumes that which she produces and cannot transcend the Mexican conceptual simulacrum; her critical divergence from her predecessors is that she engages in two distinct phases of Other-construction and positions herself as both consumer and consumed. She first constructs the Other for its consumption as a test site for romantic ideology where she might affirm the goodness and virtue of the values of the home space.

Uncertain about the benefits of technology, speed, globalization, and her own role in a global society’s effort to consume Mexico, Porter turns to the romantic idealism of the Mexican Revolution. After her childhood in a log cabin, the early death of her mother, three marriages variously saturated with abuse, and an adult life characterized by life-threatening poverty,
influenza, and tuberculosis, Porter suddenly finds herself south of the border, immersed in a world of Otherness where corrupt politics, deception, and the glamour of revolution dominate the perfumed atmosphere. Integrating herself into a revolutionary crowd of artists composed of people like Diego Rivera, she quickly experiences the shortcomings of romanticism. The resulting construction of Otherness in her fiction takes a shape similar to Crane’s— the Mexican conceptual space is consumed by the pseudo-tourist who needs to confirm the value of neo-liberal, neo-romantic idealism. Many of Porter’s characters want to help Mexico attain political stability and social equality; thus, they integrate themselves into Mexican society, although they never achieve wholeness, and Mexico remains a space of Otherness.

“Flowering Judas” and “That Tree” both utilize a Mexican setting in which American characters attempt to reconcile their modern doubts and fears about modernity by traveling to Mexico, the primitive space where romance and idealism may still have a fighting chance. In “Flowering Judas,” Laura becomes disillusioned with the insincerity of the revolutionaries whom she has come to Mexico to aid. She witnesses the hypocrisy of men who claim to fight for justice but who actually fight for material gain. The oppressed seem to be on a mission to become the oppressors, rather than to eradicate oppression. Laura despairs and feels duped as she takes note of the shrewd wickedness “stipulated for loving the world profitably.” In her own life, Porter’s disillusionment led her to denounce several of the revolutionaries who turned into political leaders— men such as Obregon’s Minister of Education, Vasconselos, whom she used to support during her days of ardent idealism. Porter may be transferring anxiety about her own failed idealism onto Laura, who then transfers it onto the Mexican conceptual space as a whole: “This world,” Laura muses, “shall be merely a tangle of gaping trenches.”

31 (Porter 98, 100)
Laura’s idealism does not, it may be argued, actually connote her genuine love for Mexico; rather, it may be a symptom of what Unrue calls “the idealization of places”. She is simply reluctant to return to the home space of her imagined community; she fears that it also may have become too vulnerable to the moral deterioration of modernity. In this Mexican conceptual space, foreigners meet failure perhaps because they should not intrude where they do not belong, though Laura suggests that intrusion alone cannot account for repeated failure of this magnitude. It is almost too much for her to face the truth about her ideals, about her identity, and about her mapping of those ideals onto geography. When from the Judas tree “she [eats] the flowers greedily,” we understand that Laura’s true betrayal is not only a crime against the Other; it is also a crime against the Self. Violence cannot be done to one without harming both. It should be noted, however, that Laura’s mistake inside the world of the narrative remains ironically superficial: she fails her political mission, she imposes her postcolonial foreignness onto the Third World, and she does not trust her home space to protect her and provide her shelter from Otherness. The safety and goodness that she should always expect from her imagined community waits for her on the other side of the border. Paralysis, irony, and lack of resolution persist because, as a character, Laura never overcomes her obsession with geography.

The journalist in “That Tree” also refuses to return to the home space—instead, he gives up poetry and makes a good living selling non-fiction to “high-priced magazines of a liberal humanitarian slant which paid him well for telling the world about oppressed peoples.” He admonishes his wife for not exhibiting the “instincts” of Mexican girls who use men as human shields to protect themselves from gunfire. For years, he coddles a romantic view of the

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32 (Unrue 624)
33 (Porter 102)
Mexican conceptual space— in his head he equates geography with the characteristics of the individuals who inhabit it. After making Mexico his home and failing to locate those characteristics of Mexicanness in himself, he gives up and resolves to make a little money so he can afford the external illusion of the internal Self that he seeks. He thus can feel satisfied that he has achieved a sense of wholeness with his romanticized view of Mexican Otherness, while still retaining the safe sense of disconnection from it to ensure the survival of his superiority. Like Laura, his story ends in paralysis, and in the last line “he seem[s] to be admonishing himself before a mirror.” The mirror, of course, invokes the border in all of its fetishized, mythological glory.  

Porter, too, all her life— even after relinquishing her “idealized view of Mexico as a country”— longed to achieve the vision of romanticized perfection that we assume the journalist sees in the mirror-border. Walsh and Unrue draw parallels between the failure of idealism in Porter’s fiction and the disillusionment from which she suffered in her heart and mind. She wrote home to her family telling them about being introduced to the world of Mexican politics, about socializing with the labor leaders who were going to change the country for the better, and about how she wanted to be a part of that change. She even reported that she was collaborating on a revolutionary textbook. Her failure to live up to her aspirations crushed her with the immediacy and the weight of modernity itself. The newfound potentialities of speed, technology and the shrinkage of the globe, only made the effects of her failure that much more apparent in her surroundings. She expresses anxiety about the ubiquity of knowledge, the ease of communication, and the instantaneous dissemination of all information: “I’m terrified… and have a recurring dream of Time as a thing past, done forever, I stand in a world in which nothing

34 (71, 78, 79)  
35 (Walsh)
has changed apparently, but nothing more can come to pass because there is no more Time.”

The stoppage of Time threatens to engender a global situation where “social circumstances are not separate from personal life, nor are they just an external environment to them.” Unlike Giddens, however, Porter is not optimistic about this change. She does not believe in the power of individuals to help “actively to reconstruct the universe of social activity around them.”

Instead, she feels trapped, helpless—like Laura in “Flowering Judas”—and unable to do anything to help better the social and political situation in Mexico. She cannot reconcile her Self and the Otherness in the mirror. Her ambiguous duality is both confining and sustaining, just as her American home space both protects her from the Other and makes it possible to yearn for it.

The Mexican conceptual space in her fiction would continually reflect nostalgia for, and even a belief in, the notion that geographical topology has something to do with the topography of human identity—that outward physical space is somehow a reflection of inward human space. The absence of Americans—and the presence of naïve innocence—in “Virgin Violeta” and “The Martyr” perhaps indicates Porter’s tightened grip on the signifiers of a romanticized past. In the former of the two stories, Porter depicts innocence lost and the empty promises of poetry. A young Mexican girl discovers that her idea of true love had been a lie, that “a kiss meant nothing at all.” Similarly, “The Martyr” depicts a man named Ruben—“the most illustrious painter in Mexico”—who refuses to give up on the idea that his declining health is a result of his obesity, rather than a result of his broken heart. He will not allow modernity to strip him of his romantic notions about the world. And yet, Porter sketches his character so that he does not appear to be completely alone in his foolishness. No one in his circle of friends will try

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36 (Unrue 624)
37 (Giddens 12)
to get him to go to the doctor because they do not want to pull the curtain back on the falseness of his quixotic convictions: “there was not a person in the group, possibly not one in all Mexico, indelicate enough to do such a thing.” Here Porter remains undeniably torn between constructing the Mexican Other as the virtuous romantic and the foolish anachronism. Perhaps she sees herself on both sides of the mirror-border and preserves them both out of necessity, for the existence of one depends on the existence of the other.38

Thus far, Porter’s treatments of Mexico—intimately tied to her involvement in the post-Díaz tide of revolution—reveal a sensitive and affectionate author torn between a desire to resolve her identity crisis and a desire to salvage artistic integrity. She wants to feel whole, but she also wants to treat Mexico fairly. Her awareness of these conflicting desires— and the incompatibility of idealism and modernity— is evident in the thoughts and actions of her characters, in whom Walsh is probably correct to note “the involvement of Porter’s own personality in ways she may never have completely understood.” This autobiographical awareness sets Porter apart from Ridge and Crane, and endows her work with a significant amount of compassion. She critiques the consumer-Self as a foreign intruder, whereas Ridge and Crane freely indulge in stereotypes and mythology. Her romanticizing of Mexico certainly builds upon the legacy of simulacra preceding her, but thickly layered irony never allows her narratives to sink to the level of simplicity characteristic of nineteenth century border literature. She is aware, clearly, of her desire to unite her Self with that which she sees in the Other; indeed, she abandons romantic idealism—her initial reason for consuming Otherness—as a result of this very self-awareness.39

38 (Porter 33, 36)
39 (Walsh 124)
Why, then, is she incapable of transcending the economics of consumption? How does she not manage to escape the production and consumption of simulacra? How is she unable to deconstruct the heritage of the Mexican conceptual spaces that she so devoutly refuses to inherit?

The second phase of her consumption of the Other is, paradoxically, also exactly that—a deconstruction of Mexican conceptual spaces, although she falls just short of a full dismantling. She is unable to dismantle the simulacrum of the Other because she is unable to dismantle her own simulacrum; if global modernity does not exclude conceptual Mexicanness from its totalizing grasp, then nor does it exclude conceptual Americanness. Inside and outside the home space, as well as any space of the Other, modernity exercises the power “to organize and normalize aspects of social life.”\(^{40}\) It replaces individuality with intertextuality across all borders—on both the local and the global scale, in both the First and the Third World. What we can learn from looking at the ideology of form underlying the tensions and ambiguities of Porter’s fiction is that—when the gap between culture and nature loses relevance—not even the home space of the dominant consumer-Selves can escape the precession of simulacra. Their desires are manufactured and consumed by marketing, their identities are created and destroyed by ravenous anthropology, and their conceptions of the home space are merged with their conceptions of themselves. Porter’s writing thus reflects the duality and ambiguity that manifests itself in the actions of a consumer who no longer understands what she is buying or why she is buying it.

The faceless, robotic machine of the archaeologist in “María Concepción” highlights the non-existence of free will to which, in modernity, even consumers resign. Throughout the narrative, Porter’s anxiety about her identity crisis projects itself onto the Mexican conceptual space as she both consumes Mexico as the Other and laments her inability to reconcile

\(^{40}\) (Giddens 14)
geography with identity. In this space where artifacts have become more valuable than human life, neither the senseless plight of the protagonist, nor that of the archaeologist Givens—who rejoices over finding “small clay heads and bits of pottery and fragments of painted walls for which there [is] no good use on earth, being all broken and encrusted with clay”—have a mechanism for escaping the simulacra of conceptual identity. Although the construction of conceptual identities still occurs here—the natives represent the Otherness of a pure, presymbolic, internal home space and the westernized elites represent a simulacrum of the modern, civilized, external home space—we get a sense of how mindlessly consumption operates. There is no evil agency driving the archaeological dig, no mastermind protecting the dominant ideology. Givens’ mindless, automatic consumption, juxtaposed with María’s desperate search for meaning, demonstrates the futility of searching in conceptual spaces for wholeness of Self. Givens cannot dig deep enough to discover the “essence” of Mexico—the Other can never have an essence except that which is projected onto it by the Self. Neither Porter nor her characters can make sense of the search because they cannot conceive of the Turnerian regenerative frontier as an internal phenomenon, rather than an external space.

External spaces, the realm of the symbolic, are far too vulnerable to repetitive simulacra. As we see in “Hacienda,” reality degenerates into nothing “more than an immense script and a perpetual motion picture.” The narrator, Porter’s fictional stand-in, must read her lines and carry on. She panics because she senses a certain loss of authenticity in the repeated failures to reform social life in Mexico; this loss of authenticity, then, leads her on a panicked search to locate an authentic experience where nothing is ever authentic.41

A disillusioned Porter, travelling with a fictionalized version of Sergei Eisenstein’s film crew, both critiques and participates in the foreign consumption of Mexico. The narrative

41 (Baudrillard 1741)
distance that Porter uses for “Hacienda” is far removed from the events of the story. Porter’s search for individual identity no longer resembles the resolve of Ridge’s or Crane’s; her individual investment gets swallowed, withdrawn, and replaced by stasis and indecision. The resulting paralysis of her individual Self informs the story’s essentially plotless narrative, in which all of the characters feel the need to use “action [as] their defense against the predicament they [are] in,” which is that “nothing [is] happening.” Nothing happens because the past, present, and future, seem like they have already been arranged in an endless repetition of events that no longer surprises anyone. The narrator recounts the past and predicts the future when she speculates that “don Genaro and his fellow-hacendados would fret and curse, the Agrarians would raid, and ambitious politicians in the capital would be stealing right and left enough to buy such haciendas for themselves… all arranged.” Porter’s ironic tone throughout the story vindicates her ego, but her actions heap upon her head more charges than before. Her passivity leads to a lack of narrative action, and she relegates herself to observer status as she writes long passages about the nature of Mexico, echoing her former romantic idealism. She characterizes the Mexican landscape as an “unchanged world” full of “closed dark faces… full of instinctive suffering, without individual memory, or only the kind of memory animals may have, who when they feel the whip know they suffer but do not know why and cannot imagine a remedy.” Her assertion that the Mexican native lacks an individual memory invokes the Mexican conceptual simulacrum as eternal.42

The Mexican conceptual space, therefore, is no longer autonomous reality any more than Porter’s consumption of it is her conscious choice. Culture has already become nature because “the love of death ha[s] become a habit of the spirit… a common memory of defeat.” The sign— the myth— of Mexico is bolstered and reinforced as much by Porter’s diction and

42 (Porter 169, 168, 142)
imagery as it is by the film crew’s profitable propaganda— the signification of Mexico has become inseparable with any “real” Mexico. The gap between Mexico as signifier and Mexico as signified reflects the ambiguous, complicated dualism of both Mexican identity and Porter’s identity. The hacienda owners depend on the cultural traditions of ancient Mexico to sustain the rigid hierarchy of power that enables them to enjoy modern pleasures such as driving fast cars and airplanes. The modern, globalized economy— of which Porter is a member— also depends on similar paradoxical logic. Porter needs the conflicted, savage Mexico in order to maintain her idealization of its conceptual space; yet, she also needs to feel as though her identity does not establish itself at the expense of an Other. America wants to consume Mexico, but not as a self-identified, self-sufficient entity. Consumption, though aware of itself, continues, embodied by Porter and the film crew continuing to create the Other in order to conform to the needs of global consumers. In Porter’s attempt to escape her consumer status, she ends up merely retaining a bit of her old idealism and still participates in the consumer/consumed construction of the Other, effectively turning the Mexican conceptual space into a literary exercise in archaeology. For Porter, Mexico ultimately produces a duality of home spaces. To the north, America represents a mature— thus contaminated— space of symbolic safety; to the south, Mexico represents an original— thus pure— space of imaginary comfort. Porter inevitably shares a genealogy of constructed history with the conception of the former, and she harbors a desire to protect the conception of the latter from that very genealogy. In this way, her consumption of the Mexican conceptual space is maternal— without betraying the patriarchal protection provided by the American home space, her border literature consumes the spaces of Otherness which, on a psychological level, she believes may contain salvageable remnants of the protolinguistic safety and comfort of an innocence lost.

43 (143)
Porter’s fiction is the recognition and documentation of defeated idealism and defeated deconstruction. Treated as a cultural investigation, the Mexican conceptual space in her stories reveals the sterility of authorial intent and the primacy of preconceived signification. America’s relationship with Mexico, and vice-versa, is conditioned by eternal layers of representation, and the extent to which modernity solidifies the accumulation of social, cultural, and historical myths makes it impossible for artists to escape the process of construction and consumption. An honest and earnest writer who sold stories about personal guilt and anxiety, Porter cannot be accused of disingenuousness or exploitation. The abandonment of external identity construction—for Porter, her contemporaries, and all who came before and all who have come since—is impossible because no text can function without the representations that it necessarily uses as referents. The virtual disappearance of the gap between signifying space and conceptual space leaves even a great American writer at a metaphorical loss for words. American responses to representations of our border-mirrors have become nothing less than instinctive to a frighteningly Pavlovian degree. From Porter, we learn about the origins of that instinct—we learn that our attitudes toward internal borders reflect our attitudes toward external borders; we learn that our consumption of external borders provides an illusory space of comforting repression, misguided transference, and digested projection that solves inner problems with outer solutions.

The same year *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter* was published, America abolished its national origins quotas for immigration; decades since, dramatic demographic shifts and the threat of “multiculturalism” have scared consumers enough to multiply alarmist discourses that stress the importance of preserving the sanctity of the home space.44 Globalization chases us into smaller home spaces, and we reify more inclusive conceptions of Otherness—all in vain, considering the multiplication of borders only heralds the further

44 (Chavez)
multiplication of mirrors. Globalization may demand a Porter-esque reevaluation of the ways we construct our individual and national identities. Her failures beg the question of whether or not it is even possible.

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