“REAL? HELL, YES, IT’S REAL. IT’S MEXICO”:
PROMOTING A US NATIONAL IMAGINARY IN THE WORKS OF WILLIAM SPRATLING AND
KATHERINE ANNE PORTER

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This project explores how American literature reified and advanced the US national imaginary of the 1930s that relied upon depictions of a subordinate Mexican neighbor. I approach this topic through a multifocal lens that situates the stories of William Spratling and Katherine Anne Porter within their social environment and links their works to an imagined community contemporary to their publication. I problematize and interpret Spratling and Porter’s stories to understand how their representations of Mexico and Mexicanness reproduce the US national imaginary during the Great Depression. I analyze their works as distinct bibliographies and as products of a specific space and generation that share similar themes and inform the US national imaginary. I work with a limited selection from each of the authors’ bibliographies: Spratling’s 1932 *Little Mexico* and three stories from Porter’s 1935 anthology *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, “María Concepción,” “Flowering Judas,” and “Hacienda” form the base of the analysis I undertake in this project. I use each of these stories to illustrate different components of the US national imaginary in the 1930s.

By depicting Mexicans as a primitive race inherently linked to the landscape, the authors situate Mexico against an imagined US nation-state in these stories. Spratling and Porter shape the identities of both their Mexican and Anglo characters through economic and cultural means that correlate with the strategies US nation-building policies of the time. Moreover, elements of modernity and objectivity in their narratives reflect how Spratling and Porter reflected the US national imaginary through their work. By placing Spratling and Porter’s texts in conversation with these themes, I complicate the authors’ ostensibly positive representations of Mexico and
Mexicanness and suggest that their rendered homogeneity was a reaction against the economic uncertainty and social transformations of the Great Depression. Complying with nation-building projects in the 1930s, the national imaginary of these stories rationalized racialized social practices within the US. Despite aesthetic and thematic connections to the cultural left, Spratling and Porter’s work continued to reify the creation of an American national imaginary that relied on a hierarchical relationship with Mexico.
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INTRODUCTION

The Lady writer was disturbed about them. What, she said, have they to live for? Their life is a drudge. They cannot even enjoy pretty clothes. Look at them work. That stone thing in the kitchen, the thing they grind the corn on, is a symbol of slavery. And the symbol of their womanhood is that drab scarf you call the rebozo. Their very shape enveloped in it becomes one of self-abnegation. (Spratling 175)

This passage, which opens William Spratling’s “Lola,” one of eleven vignettes in his 1932 collection *Little Mexico*, demonstrates the biases of a stereotypical American, “the lady writer,” who judges Mexican culture from her insular, Euro-American point-of-view. Throughout “Lola,” Spratling distinguishes himself from “the lady writer”: “I [Spratling] pointed out that even without a Junior League to attend, they [Mexicans] really lived very full lives. I tried to say something about the business of living and functioning within racial traditions, but it was somehow hard to make clear” (175-176). While Spratling reveals the absurdity of “the lady writer’s” ethnocentric impressions of Mexico, his own representations of Mexico similarly depict Mexicanness through a biased, Eurocentric lens: “In the thick book [the baptism registry] will be found inscribed the name of one Lola Redondita as a mother. It is in that one three times and it is also in the book-of-children-with-fathers once. In the registration of the birth of her newest infant she states her age as twenty. That was barely a month ago. She looks eighteen” (Spratling 179). Spratling critiques Lola’s sexual promiscuity and suggests that Lola’s situation is not unique. Both “the lady writer’s” and Spratling’s observations of Mexico and its people illustrate a nation ostensibly different from the US. By representing Mexico and Mexicanness through this lens, I

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1 Spratling explains that there are two baptism registry books. The first registers “legitimate” children with legally married parents; the second has the names of children of single mothers “which included almost all the Little Mexicans” (177). The “thick book” refers to the latter baptism registry, indicating that three of Lola’s children are “illegitimate.”
contend that Spratling reproduces dominant US attitudes towards Mexico in the 1930s. Popular media and public policies depicted Mexicans as primitive, sexually deviant, racialized “others” who implicitly opposed the values of the US nation-state; subsequently, these depictions contributed to the formation of the US national imaginary of the time.

This project explores how American literature reified and advanced the US national imaginary of the 1930s that relied upon depictions of a subordinate Mexican neighbor. I approach this topic through a multifocal lens that situates the stories of William Spratling and Katherine Anne Porter within their social environment and links their works to an imagined community contemporary to their publication. I problematize and interpret Spratling and Porter’s stories to understand how their representations of Mexico and Mexicanness reproduce the US national imaginary during the Great Depression. I analyze their works as distinct bibliographies and as products of a specific space and generation that share similar themes and inform the US national imaginary. By depicting Mexicans as a primitive race inextricably linked to the landscape, the authors situate Mexico against an imagined US nation-state in these stories. Spratling and Porter shape the identities of both their Mexican and Anglo characters through economic and cultural means that correlate with the strategies of US nation-building policies of the time. Additionally, the literary styles they employ in their narratives reflect how Spratling and Porter reproduce the US national imaginary through their work. I analyze these concerns in conjunction with important socio-political and cultural projects of the Great Depression to demonstrate how Spratling and Porter’s works fit within their larger historical context.

Through this project, I complicate existing scholarship that claims Spratling and Porter’s representations are sympathetic portrayals of “real” Mexico. For example, Spratling’s biographer Taylor D. Littleton writes that *Little Mexico* was “an affectingly authentic account of
the country’s history, especially of the mythic and ceremonial memory lying beneath its contemporary presence” (217). While I agree that Spratling romanticizes Indo-Mexican culture by exploring pre-Colombian traditions, I believe that Spratling’s “authentic account” of Mexico’s history implicitly supports the US national imaginary because it reaffirms popular representations of Mexico as a primitive, pre-modern nation. According to Matthew Frye Jacobson, American travel writers of the early 20th century often portrayed “the mythic, preindustrial figure of the foreigner as a living symbol of the world left behind ... whose evolutionary shortfalls and whose lives ostensibly outside of history seemed to recommend either extinction, removal, or reformation under the stewardship of the West” (107). By representing Mexicans similarly, I argue that Spratling and Porter reproduce the logic of travel writers that Jacobson studies. For example, Spratling details Lola’s superstitions, indicating the strength of her pre-modern beliefs despite her Catholic faith, a signifier of Spanish colonization:

Once I [Spratling] outlined a devil mask with charcoal on the white-washed wall over the kitchen brasero. It could have been easily dusted off, but instead, Lola carefully spread a paper over it, pinning it at the corners. When I lifted a corner and let one eye of the figure show, Lola would turn her back and shudder, so I cleaned it off. But Lola said the devil would certainly revenge himself on her. (183)

Spratling is amused by Lola’s superstitions, but he is also protective of her; in short, Lola’s primitive beliefs compel Spratling to care for her and bring her under his guardianship, mirroring the narratives Jacobson analyzes that promoted US hegemony in the Western Hemisphere.

Likewise, I situate Porter’s sympathy toward Mexico within constructions of US cultural hegemony. Typical of Porter’s scholars, Janis Stout describes her attitudes toward Mexico: “Alongside her sense of the Mexican Indian as an eternal victim, this major body of work reveals
her hope for the success of the revolution linked to her fear of its failure … and always the tense coexistence of beauty with violence” (50). I agree that Porter’s stories demonstrate compassion for Mexico’s citizenry and support for the Revolution, but I believe she implicitly reproduces the US national imaginary through elements of authorship, narrative voice, and setting. For example, in Porter’s story “Flowering Judas,” the protagonist Laura, an Anglo-American woman living in Mexico City during the Mexican Revolution, describes a young revolutionary she meets: “A young captain who had been a soldier in Zapata’s army attempted, during a horseback ride near Cuernavaca, to express his desire for her with the noble simplicity befitting a rude folk-hero: but gently, because he was gentle” (148). In this passage, Laura reveals her affection for the revolutionary and assigns to him positive, romanticized traits – “noble simplicity,” and gentleness. Laura’s admiration for the revolutionary is representative of Porter’s positive and sympathetic representations of Mexicans, especially those displaced by the Revolution (e.g., soldiers and/or impoverished Indo-Mexicans). Despite Porter’s implicit criticisms of a neo-imperial Mexican culture linked to a system of US cultural hegemony, I contend there are other elements within “Flowering Judas that support a US national imaginary. For example, by setting “Flowering Judas” during the Revolution and in Mexico City, Porter locks Mexico and Mexicans in a specific time and space that engenders violence: “Laura feels a slow chill, a purely physical sense of danger, a warning in her blood that violence, mutilation, a shocking death, wait for her with lessening patience” (“Flowering” 144). Porter highlights the violence of the Mexican Revolution even though it ostensibly ended eight years prior to the story’s publication; as such, the Revolution becomes an unresolved nation-building project. By projecting violence onto Mexico while simultaneously displacing episodic violence in the US, Porter implicitly distinguishes the two nations and posits the violence-riddled Mexico against the stable US.
Theoretical and Historical Foundations

In order to demonstrate how I situate this literature within the US national imaginary of the 1930s, I will briefly describe how I understand the terms imagined community and national imaginary. I borrow heavily from the work of Benedict Anderson who defines the nation as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (6). Anderson writes that nationalism “invents nations where they do not exist” (6, emphasis in original). Throughout this project, I consider the US as an imagined nation dependent upon conceptions of its borders and democratic system to define its community against other nations. This is particularly important in the 1930s because of the new immigrant population that was settling in the American southwest. As these immigrants began visibly penetrating the US-Mexico border, new immigration laws and the newly instated Border Patrol strengthened the limits of the US nation-state.2 Mae Ngai writes, “By the early 1930s the Immigration Service was apprehending nearly five times as many suspected illegal aliens in the Mexican border area as it did in the Canadian border area” (70). The southern border became the contested space in which the US reified its “limits.” In this imagined nation, then, public figures – politicians, writers, and artists – and popular texts constructed narratives that informed a national imaginary in concert with the changing social realities.

Similar to Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community,” national imaginaries are psychoanalytical constructions of the “self.” In this context, “imaginary” refers to Lacan’s “mirror-stage” of development where “[t]he relation between the self and its image constitutes the ‘Imaginary’ dimension – so named not because it is unreal, but because it involves an image” (“Jacques” 1159). The national imaginary, then, is the formation of the “self” (i.e., the nation)

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2 This is not to say individuals of Mexican descent were not previously living in what is now the American Southwest. However, after the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, the American government focused new attention on individuals they perceived to be Mexican immigrants (i.e. the birth of the US Border Patrol).
through its representations in media, literature, and film. Scholar Michael Walsh, citing Anthony Wilden, explains that the term “national imaginary”

comes from Lacan's observation that at a certain stage in an infant's maturation it will (mis)recognize itself as having a distinct unity when it looks at its reflection in a mirror and identifies with that reflection. This unity will also be defined in part through the recognition of difference from the image of the mother in whose arms the infant is mythically held at the crucial moment known as the mirror phase. (Walsh 7)

The second part of this definition suggests that the imagined US nation-state constructs and legitimates the national imaginary through representations that distinguish the “self” from a generalized “other.”

In her monograph *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican National Imaginaries*, scholar Nicole Guidotti-Hernández intricately links national imaginaries with processes of violence and discipline; she contends that the development of national imaginaries “requires that citizen-subjects be theorized in relation to power, pain, and domination” (7). Through processes of remembering and forgetting, the US (and its agents) emphasizes certain nationalized narratives while others are effaced in order to maintain stable formations of “self” within the nation-state. Guidotti-Hernández offers several avenues of exploration in terms of selective forgetting: violence, cultural similarities, and spatial and temporal displacements. My project examines these elements in Spratling and Porter’s stories in order to demonstrate how their narratives disrupt Mexican nation-building processes in order to maintain the distinctions between the “self” and “other.”

Spratling and Porter portray violence through scenes of the Mexican Revolution that ostensibly ended in 1921, more than ten years prior to the publication of the works I study in this
project. By leaving the Mexican Revolution unresolved, Spratling and Porter prevent Mexico from modernizing. They simultaneously disremember violence in the US, thereby reifying a cultural binary between the US and Mexico. Furthermore, the temporal and spatial settings of their stories perpetuate narratives of cultural dissimilarity. As I indicate above, Spratling’s stories emphasize a pre-Colombian Indo-Mexican culture that distance his “little Mexico” from contemporary society. Likewise, both Spratling and Porter locate their narratives in specific locations – Taxco and Mexico City, respectively – that accentuate the cultural differences between Mexico and the US. Through these thematic elements, the authors I analyze contribute to the processes of selective forgetting while claiming sympathetic attitudes towards their subject.

During the 1930s, federal policies influenced the national imaginary in part by situating the US against Mexico and reaffirmed the vision of “self” in comparison to representations of Mexico and Mexicanness. I understand the 1930s as a unique cultural moment in which changing economic and cultural conditions stressed the US nation-state and national imaginary. According to scholar Fredrick Pike in his monograph *FDR’s Good Neighbor Policy: Sixty Years of Generally Gentle Chaos*, the Great Depression indicated that “the old-time winners seemed to have thrown the entire system into disarray and despair, traditionally poverty-stricken groups within the United States itself and indeed within the entire American hemisphere came in for re-evaluation” (8). However, strengthened nationalism accompanied this call for change. As nationalist policies produced new social realities within the US, a national imaginary developed that justified and propagated these changes. In the following sections, I explore how ideas of nationalism and the national imaginary functioned in the 1930s and the significant influence literature played in those processes. I demonstrate how the literary themes of race, economic and
cultural interests, and modernity and objectivity corresponded with US socio-political projects to establish a national imaginary.

Racial Themes, Racialized National Imaginary

Throughout “Lola,” Spratling links visible markers of difference to other physical and/or behavioral characteristics to create a racialized Mexican “other”: “Lola herself is a slender, brown little thing, with very black eyes and fine level black eyebrows” (Spratling 179). Spratling describes “Lola’s” subjects in animalized and infantilized terms, too: “She [Lola] says there is an old lady who lives just below her house who, when the moon is full, changes herself into a wild boar and wanders about the streets frightening people; some say she eats little children. Lola is very serious about it” (183). In this passage, Spratling uses animalization to mock Lola for her superstitions. In other instances of animalization, Spratling and Porter suggest that their subjects and/or characters’ behaviors are irrational or impulsive. Through these descriptions, Spratling and Porter imply that Indo-Mexicans are racially inferior to Anglo-Americans. I discuss Spratling and Porter’s animalization and infantilization of their characters throughout both body chapters.

Furthermore, within these narratives, Spratling and Porter link sexuality and class with race. Indigenous characters are sexually transgressive and impoverished while Anglo and/or Spanish characters are heteronormative members of the ruling class. For example, as I state above, Lola has four children by four different men. Lola bore her first child when she was fourteen and joined a soldier on his journey from Taxco to Iguala: “She came back six months later and had her first child” (Spratling 179). Even Lola acknowledges her sexual promiscuity: “Ay, señor, she said, they say that woman is a very fragile thing. Well, one evening he came in the moonlight and he caught hold of me, and he said that nothing would happen. And then, at
that moment, the fragility came over me” (Spratling 184). Not only is Lola unashamedly sexual, she is poor: “Lola tells me that in those days, not even very long ago, she and her two children and her old aunt, with whom they all still live in a single room, had exactly three tortillas a day among them. Her children lived on thin soup and half a tortilla a day apiece. They show it” (Spratling 180). By describing Lola in terms of sexuality and class, Spratling links her indigenous identity to markers of social disenfranchisement. Moreover, Lola’s racialized identity rationalizes the ways in which the US excluded people who visibly resembled her (people of presumed Mexican descent) from obtaining cultural citizenship during the 1930s. By excluding people who “looked Mexican” from the national imaginary, the US maintained homogenous representations of the “self” and perpetuated representations of Mexicans as “others.”

Anderson’s discussion of language, racism and class are particularly fruitful for understanding this connection. He writes that “racism … justif[ies] not so much foreign wars as domestic repression and domination” (Anderson 150). He also reminds readers that natural conceptions of nationality are “unchosen,” meaning that “nation-ness is assimilated to skin-colour, gender, parentage and birth-era” (143). Nationalities are immanent and immutable; they are discursive formations that nation-states use to make comparisons to “othered” nations and their citizens. During the Great Depression, public polices and popular media conspicuously compared Anglos and Mexicans and/or Mexican Americans to construct an American national identity.

For example, the 1930 census defined “the Mexican race” as its own racial category – “as ‘persons who were born in Mexico and are not definitely white, Negro, Indian, Chinese, or Japanese’” (Ngai 54). Paralleling changing immigration laws, this new category indicates that emphasized Mexican racial markers were central to the US national imaginary of the 1930s. In
the years immediately following the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act, immigration became one of the main constructs by which the US government understood the ethnic composition of the nation-state. Not only was the “nation … racially and spatially reimagined … [i]mmigration restriction produced the illegal alien as a new legal and political subject, whose inclusion within the nation was simultaneously a social reality and a legal impossibility” (Ngai 3-4, emphasis in original). With the conceptual introduction of the term “illegal alien” and its attachment to the Mexican immigrant, the US national imaginary excluded all Mexicans, or individuals of (perceived) Mexican descent (Ngai 58). Additionally, the border between Mexico and the United States became the latter’s ideological “limit” in Anderson’s definition of an imagined community; Mexico became another imagined community by which the US understood its own nation-ness. And, importantly, race was the foundation on which the US nation-state established that difference.

As such, by emphasizing race within their own stories, Spratling and Porter reify racial differences between Americans and Mexicans, who, according to the 1930 census, were “not definitely white.” While this category is somewhat ambiguous as written, by also racializing Mexicans as indigenous (and, as Spratling indicates, Asian), the authors more closely link “the Mexican race” to other racial categories that the US body politic considered socially and culturally inferior. Using this argument, my project shows that the monolithic depictions of Mexicans within the narratives I analyze reify racism in the United States as much as they rationalize foreign policy initiatives.

Between Left and Right: Reconciling Cultural Critique with Cultural Conservatism

In the next three sections of the introduction, I outline the themes that inform my analyses throughout this project: socio-economic intervention, cultural modernity, and the balance
between the authors’ literary-based critiques and their claims to objectivity. I use these themes to read Spratling and Porter’s narratives in the context of the US national imaginary. Within each of these sections, I first elucidate how these themes demonstrate Spratling and Porter’s leftist cultural sympathies. Then, I show how these themes also reify conservative US cultural hegemony and images of US economic and cultural superiority. These themes illustrate that despite Spratling and Porter’s evident sympathy for pre-Colombian Mexican culture and Mexicans dispossessed by the Mexican Revolution, and their critiques of a neo-imperial Mexican nation-state, their stories implicitly reproduce the values of the US nation-state and represent Mexico as the “other” of the US national imaginary.

Socio-Economic Intervention

About two years ago Lola came to work for me. It was difficult to persuade her, because she is very proper, entirely conventional within her ideals. She said, but señor, what will people think if I enter the house of a single sir, and then too, you are one from outside this country and I may not be able to please you with my cooking … It was very difficult.

But she finally appeared and all went well. (Spratling 182)

This passage is representative of the economic episodes Spratling includes in his book Little Mexico. Spratling provides economic support for the local economy and people. He frames himself as the Taxqueñians’ benevolent and paternal patron; however, Spratling suggests that he benefits from Lola’s labor, too: “Her omelettes filled with guacamole of alligator pear and her soup of lentils with six or seven fruits rarely fail to please my friends” (182-183, emphasis in original). While Spratling apparently needs Lola’s assistance for housekeeping, he commodifies her for his friends. Spratling inextricably links Lola’s economic value to her satisfying food; Spratling frames himself, on the other hand, as an economic asset because of his mere presence...
in her life. To me, this suggests that Spratling understands himself as the superior being; his value is intrinsic to himself while Lola’s labor determines her economic worth.

Spratling’s economic exchange with Lola corresponds with a larger American economic paradox that promoted images of benevolent US economic intervention abroad while industries within the US relied upon immigrants as a cheap source of labor. In *Barbarian Virtues*, Jacobson contends that “dominant notions of national destiny and of proper Americanism draw upon charged encounters with disparaged peoples whose presence [in the US] is as reviled in the political sphere as it is inevitable in the economic” (9). He persuasively argues for the inextricable linkages between market performance, economic demand, and the position of the immigrant, or “foreigner,” in the national imaginary. Immigrant labor was necessary for cheap economic production and consumption, but nationalized propaganda often framed immigrants as inferior in order to promote imperialism abroad. This paradox ultimately allowed US industries to deny immigrants cultural citizenship. Furthermore, James C. King suggests that the New Deal introduced nation-building projects that strengthened uniform national identity “by increasing the integration of economic activity and organization around a national plan and by emphasizing the difference that which is comprised in the national plan and that which is outside it” (818). In my body chapters, I discuss US economic themes to show how the literature I analyze reflects or effaces these economic social realities. As such, I contend that these economic narratives are one way that Spratling and Porter contributed to the discursive formation of the US national imaginary.

I specifically link Spratling’s personal economic intervention in Taxco to the Good Neighbor Policy. Popularized by FDR, the policy originated during Herbert Hoover’s presidency. As the US reimagined domestic Mexicans, it also restructured its relationship with
Latin America through this foreign policy initiative. Similar to the economic paradox I describe above, the Good Neighbor Policy acted on the premise that Latin Americans were “innocent, childlike victims” of the same depression effecting the US, while simultaneously placating Americans who “grew more hostile than ever to seeing their government share diminishing resources with ‘wastrels,’ whether in their midst or south of the border” (Pike 8). Eric Paul Roorda adds that “[t]he impulses behind the Good Neighbor policy originated, then, in the paradox between fraternity with neighboring republics and domination over them … a policy that has always been geared to gain national security and prosperity, by whatever means seem likeliest to work, from persuasion to invasion” (27).

As I indicate above, I believe that Spratling’s stories mirror the logic of the Good Neighbor Policy, reaffirming the connection between his work and socio-political projects that situated the US against Mexico in terms of international power and the economy. For example, in “Lola,” “the lady writer” assumes an outdated attitude toward intervention, judging Mexican culture from her ethnocentric perspective: “She went on, remarking that what they needed was an intellectual interest in their lives. They should be encouraged to read … And someone should tell them how much more effective they could be using a touch of rouge. Of course I realize that that golden colour may be attractive to some, but just a little powder, perhaps a little pink” (Spratling 176). “The lady writer” intervenes in Mexico in order to change and mold the culture to her expectations; Spratling, however, ostensibly models the “good neighbor” approach to US-Latin American foreign relations: “[T]hey are really nice people just the same. They simply accept many little casualties of life here that we make a fuss about. They must. They happen to be affectionate, and they love children” (177). Despite his respect for Mexican culture, he still assumed a paternal role in their lives: After Lola gets pregnant for the fourth time while working
as Spratling’s housekeeper, she says, “Señor, I should ask your pardon, because it happened in the house and the house is yours. Therefore, I should ask pardon of you as of my father” (Spratling 184, emphasis mine). By asserting that Lola hailed him as a paternal figure, Spratling implicitly justifies his intervention in her life. The Indo-Mexicans he met mandated his intervention, reifying the benevolence of his presence.

I contend that these instances throughout *Little Mexico* reproduce the logic of the Good Neighbor Policy’s efforts in Latin America. Through the Good Neighbor Policy, the US assumed a “new” image of its “self” in terms of foreign relations. Ostensibly, this “new self” embraced Latin cultural and political autonomy and encourage international cultural cooperation. However, like Roorda indicates, this image of the “self” (i.e., the national imaginary) departed from the historical realities of the 1930s: US cultural hegemony continued even after Hoover and FDR’s administrations enacted the Good Neighbor Policy.

Despite the US’s “good neighbor” approach to foreign policy, Latin American nations did not complacently accept American intervention. The early 1930s witnessed active opposition to American industrial intervention in Mexico. Julio Moreno alludes to several campaigns throughout Mexico that contested US industry: President Calles enforced a boycott in 1927 against American corporations; a “buy at home” campaign was launched in Juárez in 1931 and similar efforts were undertaken in Mexico City, too (1). Despite the fact that Mexico resisted American intervention in the 1930s, Spratling and Porter continued to represent their literary interventions in Mexico as positive moves toward transnational economic and cultural cooperation. This suggests to me that the literary techniques Spratling and Porter relied upon selectively obfuscated the historical realities of the 1930s. The authors effaced US-Mexican foreign relations of the 1930s to represent their versions of “real” Mexico. I use this literary
divergence to open up a space for critique. In terms of economic affairs, I use this discrepancy to analyze Spratling’s claim of authenticity; he develops representations of Mexico that are consistent with his economic interests in Mexico and mirrors US “good neighbor” intervention.

**Cultural Modernity**

Closely linked to the Good Neighbor Policy’s ostensible appreciation for “authentic” Mexican culture are Spratling and Porter’s criticisms of modernization (e.g., technological advancements, film, and transportation) that both esteem a “Mexican way of life” while implicitly suggesting US superiority. In terms of legitimizing Mexican culture, the authors romanticize pre-Colombian Mexico, aligning their stories with those of their contemporary Mexican nationalists like Diego Rivera. According to Anderson, nationalists actively idealize the past through the memory of the dead in order to legitimize contemporary cultural forms. I believe that in the context of Spratling and Porter’s stories, the contemporary Mexican cultural forms that they hope to legitimate are still pre-revolutionary. In the next few paragraphs, I elucidate how the romanticization of pre-Colombian and pre-revolutionary Mexican culture in the stories I analyze demonstrates the authors’ leftist cultural sympathies.

Anderson explains that the immortalization of the pre-Colombian Indo-Mexican is a process of selective remembering that signifies some “truth” about the origins of Mexican culture:

[T]hose whom [are] … exhume[ed] … [are] by no means a random assemblage of forgotten, anonymous dead … In this vein, more and more ‘second-generation’ nationalists, in the Americas and elsewhere, learned to speak ‘for’ dead people with whom it was impossible or undesirable to establish a linguistic connection … [P]olitical grandchildren became obsessed with ‘remembering,’ indeed ‘speaking for’ them, perhaps
precisely because they had, by then, so often been *extinguished.* (Anderson 198-199, emphasis in original)

Here, Anderson says that the memory of the dead reconciles imperialist guilt for extinguished populations. Nationalists often appropriate indigenous cultures to establish the “authenticity” of contemporary cultural formations. For example, in Spratling’s “Tierra Fria,” Spratling journeys to ancient ruins of the Nahua civilizations. His narrative romanticizes both the ancient civilizations and the Taxqueñians by linking them to the Aztecs and Mayans. He writes, “Twice I have been told by Indians that there was a great city, the ruined city of the most-ancient-ones-who-have-gone-before, up there on its[the Tetipac-el-Viejo mountain] summit … [E]ven if three hundred new archaeological sites a year are discovered in Mexico, this country will remain but slightly known, for a long time to come” (Spratling 57-58). Spratling depicts a mysterious Mexico, unknown to even the most experienced archaeologists. By reading “Tierra Fria” through the nationalist lens Anderson describes, I believe that Spratling suggests that Taxco is more “authentically Mexican” than other places in the nation, namely Mexico City. As such, he could market *Little Mexico* as a sympathetic, accurate representation of “real” Mexico.

Similarly, these stories resonate with an ideal championed by the cultural left: the “romance of revolution.” Michael Denning articulates that the “romance of revolution” influenced how “people imagined the globe” (12). With hope for “international solidarity,” artists in the US and abroad created new narratives “to displace imperial fantasies of race war that dominated American popular culture” (Denning 13). By sympathizing with racialized peoples dispossessed by US nation-building projects (e.g., Millennialism), Spratling and Porter, along with famed contemporaries like Diego Rivera, Langston Hughes, and Sergei Eisenstein, participated in a global cultural shift that rejected capitalism and celebrated the working class. In
my analysis of Porter’s stories, I use this shift to demonstrate how her stories supported impoverished Mexicans who remained disenfranchised after the Mexican Revolution.

However, I also read Spratling and Porter’s support of pre-Colombian and pre-revolutionary cultural forms, respectively, as signifiers of Mexican cultural inferiority. As Moreno aptly notes, the “romance of revolution” still progressed common tropes of US superiority: “They [US writers] depicted Mexicans as backward and even ‘uncivilized’ while portraying a romanticized image of Mexico’s past and its revolutionary and indigenous heritage” (52). To me, the narrative of “uncivilized” Mexico undermines the romanticized representations of indigenous Indo-Mexicans in the stories I analyze. For example in “Tierra Fria,” Spratling details how his guide Ysaías kills two scorpions for fun: “He pulls the sting off the live one [scorpion] and offers to eat him. No one insists, but he eats him anyhow. What I [Spratling] wish is that we had made a movie close-up of the battle” (Spratling 54). While Spratling expresses fascination with Ysaías’s action, this passage suggests that Mexicans are gratuitously violent, uncivilized “others.” By rendering Mexicans as pre-modern and/or pre-revolutionary, Spratling and Porter implicitly justify US intervention – it becomes necessary under the imperative of the Good Neighbor Policy. I elucidate the tensions between the leftist and conservative ideals I see in Spratling and Porter’s works further in my body chapters.

**Literary Critique, Literary Objectivity**

To further my analysis of Spratling and Porter’s stories, I look at contemporary literary styles that resonate with their work. Again, I believe that it is necessary for me to explicate how Spratling and Porter’s stories both demonstrate leftist ideology and reproduce the conservative values of the US nation-state. I look at this theme closer in Porter’s body chapter by analyzing how the leftist style of Southern modernism and the conservative style of “romantic regionalist

Its popularity coincided with concerns of a fallible national economy that was generated by the Great Depression and that directed attention to southern poverty (Duck 7). Duck continues, stating that modernism is a fruitful style through which to examine this paradox because it mobilized formal innovations designed to explore the potentially unsettling experience of modernity’s multiple temporal forms: the progressive linear time of the capitalist market and the workplace; the cyclical or contemplative time of tradition and ritual; the temporal disjunctures of uneven development; the fixated, spasmodic time of post-traumatic experience; and the idiosyncratic time of individual consciousness. (8)

Duck’s definition of Southern modernism indicates that this style contemplated the above questions as a response to the economic realities of the Great Depression. Southern modernism provided a literary outlet through which authors like Porter expressed their disillusionment with the promises of the US capitalism and modernization. For example, in “María Concepción,” Porter explores the mental and emotional state of the titular character, whose husband abandons her for his mistress; eventually, María Concepción murders the mistress while in a trance-like, automatous state. Porter describes the scene:
María Concepción, seeing that he [her husband, Juan] was quiet, began to bind the legs of her fowls. It was market-day and she was late … She ran with a crazy panic in her head, her stumbling legs. Now and then she would stop and look about her, trying to place herself, then go on a few steps, until she realized that she was not going towards the market.

At once she came to her senses completely, recognized the thing that troubled her so terribly, was certain of what she wanted … All her being was a dark confused memory of grief burning in her at night, of deadly baffled anger eating at her by day, until her very tongue tasted bitter. (“María” 20-21)

In this passage, Porter details what María is thinking and feeling. María’s confusion and pain manifests itself in her environment and time appears to stop as María moves into different societal roles: in this scene, she is simultaneously a productive citizen, a murderer, and a victim in her own right. The scene’s fragmented nature demonstrates how Porter explores a violent environment’s effect on otherwise productive, upstanding citizens. Despite trying to maintain her prescribed role in the community (selling fowls at the market), María commits a violent act, almost as a cathartic release, after a long period of oppression. This scene is representative of the critiques Porter makes of contemporary society through modernist themes. I elucidate these connections further in Chapter 2. Additionally through Southern modernism, I align her stories with the work of the cultural front that was, according to Denning, “a laboring, an incomplete and unfinished struggle to rework American culture, with hesitations, pauses, defeats, and failures” (Denning xvii). Artists of the cultural front used their practice to criticize American
capitalism and cultural hegemony and reimagine a new global camaraderie consisting of the working classes.³

Similar to the ways in which the authors use economic and cultural themes to criticize US cultural hegemony, yet which also implicitly reproduce the US national imaginary, I situate Spratling and Porter’s works within a literary style that suggests an “objective lens,” but that ultimately undermines their leftist narratives. I believe that both authors’ stories evidence themes that resonate with “romantic-regionalist-folklore ethnography,” a literary style that describes a narrative in which the author “collects folklore from a community … and then represents it in publication. This representation is done in an embellished, stylized form usually translated into a standard literary language … so as to make the original text sound more like ‘high’ literature, fit for a dominant literate reading public (Limón 51). By stylistically resembling ethnography (a social science methodology), Spratling and Porter implicitly reify their narratives’ “authenticity.” For example, as I detail above, Spratling details the mythology of Nahua civilizations in “Tierra Fria”: by recalling the origins of Taxco and its people, Spratling seemingly reveals an essential “truth” about Mexican culture. However, by also rendering Ysaías as gratuitously violent, Spratling implies that he is a member of a “primitive,” barbaric culture while Spratling himself is, conversely, “civilized.”

By linking Spratling and Porter’s works to those of “romantic regionalist folklore ethnographers” like J. Frank Dobie and Jovita González, I illustrate how the tropes of objectivity

³ I also believe Spratling’s Little Mexico stylistically resembles the cultural front. I consider the book to be an example of social realism that was, according to Denning, a representative aesthetic style of the cultural front. Denning uses social realism “to mean three things: the documentary aesthetic, a rearguard opposition to modernism, and a relatively straightforward representationalism in the arts” (118). Like Porter’s stories, however, I believe that elements in Little Mexico (like his economic paternalism) undermine his sympathetic representations of Mexico and Mexicanness.
within Spratling and Porter’s works align with processes of selective forgetting. These instances of selective forgetting effaced cultural similarities between the US and Mexico and obfuscated acts of violence committed by agents of the US nation-state, whether those persons or groups were official agents like the Border Patrol or those who acted in self-interest (e.g., tourists). According to Limón, “romantic regionalist folklore ethnographers” often rationalized US violence toward disenfranchised people through their narratives. For example, Limón analyzes J. Frank Dobie’s *Tongues of the Monte*, which explores the adventures of the young narrator Don Federico (Dobie’s double, according to Limón) through interior Mexico (like the stories I analyze). In his analysis of the story, Limón asserts, “J. Frank Dobie’s ideological construction of Mexicans [as wise, yet innocent, racialized “others”] served comedically to mask their social treatment in Texas” (59). I believe that Spratling and Porter similarly efface US violence toward Mexicans, reproducing the narrative that the US is “civilized” while Mexico is “primitive.” Like my analysis of literary modernism, I expand upon romantic folklore ethnography in Chapter 2 in order to demonstrate how both leftist Southern modernism and the conservative, yet “authentic” style of “romantic regionalist folklore ethnography” affect my interpretations of the literature I analyze.

In addition to these elements of romantic folklore ethnography, I also complicate how tropes of objectivity inform my analysis of Porter’s ostensibly leftist literary style in Chapter 2. In terms of objectivity, I am particularly interested in the ways Porter’s narratives allow certain characters to speak and keep others silent. While she claims to represent “real” Mexico, I complicate Porter’s “objective lens” by looking at how she organizes her narratives and what characters she favors. Porter’s work literally appropriates a documentary aesthetic to distance herself from the biases of Anglo capitalists in her stories. In “Hacienda,” Russian documentary
filmmakers travel to a pulque hacienda to capture Mexican history. While relaying the events of the story, Porter, too, employs a documentary style that mirrors the filmmakers’ techniques to communicate contemporary Mexican life. Using first-person-point-of-view, Porter’s narrator in “Hacienda” quietly observes the events of the story without seemingly affecting its outcome. Likewise, the narrator is apparently unbiased: she is not loyal to either the Russian filmmakers or the Mexican actors. However, the narrator still represents Anglo interests in Mexico. By comparing herself to the Mexican characters, Porter’s narrator (and, by extension, Porter herself) suggests that Mexican characters’ attempts to modernize are ridiculous:

I [the narrator] wore a knitted garment of the kind which always appears suitable for any other than the occasion on which it is being worn. Altogether, we [the Russian filmmakers and narrator] provided a staggering contrast for doña Julia [the mistress of a pulque hacienda] at the head of the table, a figure from a Hollywood comedy, in black satin pajamas adorned with rainbow-colored bands of silk loose sleeves falling over her babyish hands with pointed scarlet finger ends. (“Hacienda” 256)  

Here, Porter’s narrative implies that Anglo modernization is sensible and sophisticated while Mexican modernization is garish and laughable – an imitation of foolish characters in Hollywood films. Porter’s characterization of Doña Julia in this passage informs Jacobson’s analysis of the foreigner in other nationalist narratives. He writes, “Where the foreigner was permitted to speak at all in such writing, it was rarely to express his or her own subjectivity but, rather, to reflect some truth about modernization, social evolution, the current state of the union, or the nation’s patent and manifest destiny” (Jacobson 102). In losing the right to speak, Mexicans were absent from US nation-building projects. Anglo authors penned their version of Mexico while Mexican

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4 In Chapter 2, I discuss the relationship between Porter and her narrator in “Hacienda.” This passage also illustrates an example of infantilization in “Hacienda.” Porter characterizes Doña Julia by her “babyish” hands, that indicate Doña Julia’s youth, and suggests that Doña Julia does not do physical labor.
characters only existed to reaffirm US cultural superiority. Through this lens, I contend that “Hacienda’s” narrator cannot objectively interpret and articulate Mexicanness. As such, Porter cannot be objective either; because she denies to Mexicans the right to communicate their own experience, Porter inherently reaffirms her own power to represent Mexicanness to US audiences. To me, this suggests that Porter implicitly reproduces the US national imaginary through her “Mexico” stories. By reconciling conservative themes with her (and Spratling’s) apparently leftist representations of Mexico and Mexicanness, I show how Mexico remains the US’s “other” that reinforces the image of the “self.”

By placing Spratling and Porter’s texts in conversation with these themes, I complicate the authors’ representations of Mexico and suggest that their rendered homogeneity was a reaction against the economic uncertainty and social transformations of the Great Depression. Complying with nation-building projects in the 1930s, the national imaginary of these stories rationalized racialized social practices within the US. Additionally, I read processes of selective forgetting into Spratling and Porter’s texts in order to demonstrate how their ostensibly positive representations of Mexico and Mexicanness contributed to the formation of this national imaginary. Despite aesthetic and thematic connections to the cultural left, Spratling and Porter’s work continued to reify the creation of an American national imaginary that relied upon a hierarchical relationship with Mexico.

Overview of Chapters

I divide this remainder of this project into three main sections: Two body chapters interrogate the work of Spratling and Porter, respectively. I expand upon specific socio-political projects that fed the US national imaginary during the 1930s and I will show how their works contributed to a nationalized narrative of (Anglo) American superiority and a hierarchical
relationship between the US and Mexico. The final section of my thesis complicates a common
element in the texts, the conspicuously absent border, before offering concluding statements. I
work with a limited selection from each of the authors’ bibliographies. Spratling’s 1932 *Little
Mexico* and three stories from Porter’s 1935 anthology *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*,
“María Concepción,” “Flowering Judas,” and “Hacienda,” form the base of the analysis I
undertake in this project. I use each of these stories to illustrate different components of the US
national imaginary in the 1930s.

In Chapter 1, I examine William Spratling’s *Little Mexico*, a series of “non-fiction”
vignettes centered on everyday life in Taxco where Spratling lived most of his life. I situate his
work within the context of the Good Neighbor Policy in order to highlight how economic
developments influenced the US national imaginary. I link his narratives and characters to an
underlying framework of capitalism and modernity in order to do this. I consider Spratling’s own
capitalist intervention in Taxco through the silver industry to help interpret his texts. Instead of
simply reading *Little Mexico* as a collection of non-fiction vignettes, I suggest that his
representations of Mexico as a pre-Colombian nation and Mexicans as racialized “others” justify
his intervention in Mexico as an Anglo-American capitalist.

In Chapter 2, I analyze the work of Katherine Anne Porter in the context of the cultural
front. I look at how her work both complies with and deviates from this leftist cultural
movement. As the cultural front relied upon sympathetic representations of disenfranchised
populations, I primarily frame her work through literary techniques of objectivity. Before
analyzing how Porter races her Mexican characters as indigenous “others,” I show how specific
elements within her stories – specifically, in “Hacienda” – create an aura of objectivity that
obfuscates its fictionalized world view. Additionally, I look at how her stories depict the
Mexican Revolution; by linking her narratives to the recent past, Porter’s stories steep Mexico in an atmosphere of violence while denying legitimacy to post-Revolution modernization. Porter shows sympathy for Mexican cultural practices and warns against the dangers of US modernization, but she still favors Anglo characters over Mexican characters (evidenced through narration and character point-of-view), indicating that Anglo experiences are more valuable than those of Mexicans. Therefore, while Porter’s texts thematically resemble the artistic productions of the cultural front, her representations of Mexico still affirm Anglo superiority. By exploring Mexico almost exclusively through an Anglo lens, Porter undermines Mexican experience and renders Mexico subordinate to Anglo power.

After I explore the texts of Spratling and Porter, emphasizing the distinct ways they speak to a US national imaginary, I conclude by discussing a salient link between their works. Both Spratling and Porter efface the border within their narratives, choosing instead to situate their stories in interior Mexico. I focus on issues of immigration, deportation and repatriation that contributed to questions of the border within the US. By disregarding the shared border between the US and Mexico, I contend that the narratives define each nation-state against the other and obfuscate Mexican, American and Mexican-American experiences in both nations. In so doing, Porter and Spratling perpetuate contemporary US nation-building projects: by simultaneously intervening in foreign nations and preventing immigration by non-Europeans, the US could continue to imagine itself as white, powerful and paternal. Spratling and Porter’s effaced border distinguishes the “self” from the “other” not only in terms of racialized identity, but through the territorial “limits” of the US nation-state, too.
CHAPTER ONE: WILLIAM SPRATLING AND THE FABRICATION OF “REAL” MEXICO

Introduction

In order to articulate clearly the binary between the US and Mexico that reflected political and cultural shifts during the 1930s and that the literature I study supported, I examine several narratives from William Spratling’s *Little Mexico* that work to imagine a homogenous Mexico categorically different from the United States. By representing Mexico through its people and geography, Spratling’s stories suggest an essentialized Mexicanness reliant upon a symbiotic relationship with the land. Emphasizing ancestry and culture, Spratling creates his vision of “real” Mexico through a limited exploration of a single community in the southern state of Guerrero: Taxco. By reading Spratling’s work as an effort to communicate Mexican experiences to American audiences, I mobilize his fictionalized development of characters, both human and inanimate, to interpret how *Little Mexico* contributes to a historical narrative of qualitative difference between the US and Mexico that ultimately positioned the US as the dominant cultural state. His descriptions of the territory and residents of Taxco reveal his implicit biases toward Mexicans, despite claims to the contrary. This disjuncture between prejudice and praise and between truth and imagination are tools of selective forgetting with which Spratling crafts a Mexico inherently aligned with the US socio-political movements and national imaginary outlined in this project’s introduction.

*Good Neighbor Logic*

To help contextualize the specific processes by which *Little Mexico* contributed to a larger US socio-political project, I interrogate how it mirrors the Good Neighbor Policy’s strategies of economic and cultural intervention. In a November 26, 1928 address to a “Hispanic-American audience” in Honduras, then president-elect Herbert Hoover articulated the ideals of
the Good Neighbor Policy: “‘In our daily life, good neighbors call upon each other as the
evidence of solicitude for the common welfare and to learn of the circumstances and point of
view of each, so that there may come both understanding and respect which are the cementing
forces of all enduring society. This should be equally true amongst nations’” (DeConde 18,
emphasis in original). Hoover’s statement established the Good Neighbor Policy as a new model
of US-Latin American relations that ostensibly ended the model of “Yankee imperialism” that
was popularized through the Monroe Doctrine and strengthened through the Roosevelt Corollary.
The Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt administrations used the policy to counter images of corrupt
“big stick” diplomacy that prevailed through the first 30 years of the 20th century. Officially
declaring a new “non-interventionist” relationship between the US and Latin America, the Good
Neighbor Policy was a political maneuver that reframed intervention as a capitalist approach to
intra-hemispheric cooperation and avoided explicit military occupation. According to Joy
Elizabeth Hayes in her project Radio Nation, the Good Neighbor Policy did not end US
intervention in the Western Hemisphere; instead it was a “creative transformation of the methods
of control and domination” (64). In Yankee Don’t Go Home!, Julio Moreno articulates that the
policy acted upon the promise of mutual benefit: by increasing the prosperity of Latin American
nations, the US could “create a pool of consumers that would allow American capitalist
expansion” (Moreno 48). Promoting this policy was a way to guarantee US dominance while
veiling the continued exploitation of Latin American nations from US audiences.

Spratling intervened in Taxco through artistic and industrial projects he launched after
settling there in 1929. A long-time resident of Louisiana, Spratling first came to Mexico as a
traveler and intellectual. His most famous composition, Little Mexico was the result of his
journey through Mexico and eventual settlement in the rural mining community of Taxco.
Remaining in Taxco until his death in 1967, Spratling claimed to write from a local’s perspective; as such, Spratling’s vignettes or “portraits” were acclaimed non-fiction insights into “real” Mexico. In *The Color of Silver, William Spratling: His Life and Art*, Spratling’s biographer Taylor D. Littleton suggests that “[n]ot only was he [Spratling] already a man in whom his Mexican compatriots took pride and placed great trust, he was gradually becoming an American presence in Mexico that formed a visible and culturally attractive link between a steady stream of prominent American visitors … and the country they wanted to see and experience” (4-5). I believe that Spratling’s multiple interests in Mexico reveal certain tensions that should be read into the publication of *Little Mexico*.

The projects he undertook and his rationale for them evidence how Spratling understood his political and social position in Taxco. Spratling’s most aggressive intervention was the foundation of his silver workshop (or, taller) in 1931. Named Las Delicias, Spratling employed 78 local residents by 1935 and 120 silversmiths by 1938 at his Taxco workshop (Morrill 24, 25). The workshop specialized in indigenous designs; however, journalist Ernie Pyle noted “‘Spratling would like to do some modernistic designing of his own in silver, but he knows that for psychological reasons he must keep it native’” (qtd. in Morrill 24). While Spratling openly romanticized indigenous culture, he also appreciated modern aesthetics and understood how economic success depended upon modernization.¹ As such, it is no surprise that Spratling’s industry expanded within its first decade to support two additional workshops and supplied jewelry designs to an American company, Silson (Morrill 25). This contradiction is reminiscent

¹ Throughout this chapter, I use modernization to describe a system of mechanized industry, standardized workdays, technological advancements (e.g., automobiles), Fordism, in addition to epistemic developments (i.e., belief in Darwinism) and expedited social interaction and communication (e.g., telephone networks) that are associated with the early 20th century. In “The Town,” Spratling firmly establishes that Taxco is not modernized: “World economic depressions mean little here and if the exchange goes sky high – it has little to do with them, who deal in centavos …. The events of a fairly luminous electric light system and a motor-driven mill for making their corn into masa, have had little effect on their daily life. Fashions, movies, time-saving devices mean almost nothing” (7,8)
of the tenuous relationship between modern and primitive in *Little Mexico*. For example, in the collection’s first vignette, “The Town,” Spratling describes how traditions of pre-revolutionary Taxco function within the economic collapse of post-revolutionary Mexico:

Later, armies and leaders of the Independence came through. Porfirio Díaz and his friends entered by this road – entered with their revolution, promising they would not conscript the young men from here, which is what they immediately did. Zapata and his cavalry dashed through this street … ending inanely its first breath of prosperity in a hundred years … Today all these elements must live together. And they do, because all revolutions are not necessarily effective, even though they appear so at the moment. And because all good revolutionists cannot go to Paris…. Now occasional automobiles rush through, or stop for a bottle of beer and some postcards, on their way down to Iguala and the coast. But muleteers, their burro trains laden with charcoal, timber, and shipments of rich ore, still troop through the town by the camino real. (14)

In this passage, Spratling links modernization (automobiles and tourism) and economic despair to the Mexican Revolution, rather than acknowledge the connection between American intervention in Mexico and the influx in modern infrastructure or economic exploitation in Taxco.

Likewise, Spratling both acknowledged and dismissed his own role in the burgeoning silver industry, indicating that he understood the militaristic intervention of the Mexican Revolution and his own economic intervention differently. An interview with the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* newspaper summarizes his attitude toward silversmithing:

The only thing I have done is to capitalize this gift [silver craftsmanship] … Instead of leaving all this precious metal and graceful workmanship to lie around loose, I persuade
them to come into a shop … And when I suggested to them that they might work eight hours a day and I would pay them from two to four pesos for their labor they seized on the idea with enthusiasm … The idea of a steady salary looks good to them, too. (Morrill 20)

This passage suggests that Spratling naturalized his capitalistic intervention in Taxco’s economy. It was his foresight and innovation that allowed the Mexicans to share their artisanship with the world. And, it was his work ethic (eight hour workdays) that prepared the Taxqueñians for a burgeoning tourist economy in the community. As Spratling gained a reputation as the “Father of Taxco,” he pushed the silver industry toward modernization in terms of streamlined manufacturing and international markets while maintaining a paternalistic attitude toward Taxco and its people. Again, this mirrors the rationale of the Good Neighbor Policy: both Spratling and the US government framed their economic and cultural interventions as natural and benevolent for both US and international audiences.

However, Mexico was not actually dependent upon US economic assistance in the way that the silver shop suggests; in this way, Spratling’s *Little Mexico* communicates an incomplete vision of Mexico during the 1930s, selectively forgetting the economic similarities between the US and Mexico. While this project does not explore how the Great Depression affected Mexico or how Mexico responded to the Good Neighbor Policy, a brief introduction to the cultural and economic projects in Mexico demonstrates Spratling’s anachronisms in *Little Mexico*. Three Mexican socio-political projects are relevant here: economic nationalism, tourism, and government-supported arts programs demonstrate how Mexico modernized (in)dependently of the US.

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2 In an interview with Robert David Duncan, Spratling discusses his reputation as a silver industrialist: “‘I have been ticketed as the ‘father’ of the industry, and so forth. Sometimes, it’s a little bit more than I can bear, since I have to listen to it sometimes three, four, or five times a day’” (80).
First, economic nationalism refers to the process by which the Mexican government seized control of domestic industries. The growth of the domestic Mexican oil industry in the 1920s best represents how Mexico practiced economic nationalism: Mexico attempted to curtail foreign (read: US) exploitation of its oil reserves by regulating foreign investments in the industry.\(^3\) Regarding tourism, many of the rural communities in Southern Mexico became popular destinations for Americans in the 1920s and 30s. While US expatriates like Spratling aided in the renaissance of these communities, Mexico capitalized upon the opportunities for reinvention, too. For example, Helen Delpar contends that by 1931 a cross-country, “all-weather road” connected Taxco with Cuernavaca and Acapulco, facilitating automobile transportation throughout Mexico (106). Moreover, the state began restoring pre-Colombian ruins that bolstered their popularity among tourists (Delpar 102).\(^4\) Finally, the strength of government-supported arts programs demonstrates how cultural innovation did not only flow from north to south. George Biddle, who served on the US Commission of Fine Arts during the Great Depression, used a Mexican model of government-supported art programs as inspiration for the Works Progress Administration-Federal Arts Program (Littleton 138). These economic and cultural developments in Mexico reaffirm the narrow focus of Spratling’s book. By not engaging these contemporary cultural projects, Spratling’s selective representation of Mexico and Mexicanness essentialized a qualitative difference between the US and Mexico and reified a US national imaginary which posited the US as the dominant nation-state in the Western Hemisphere and rationalized intervention in Latin America as a cultural exchange initiative.

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\(^3\) Mexico attempted to conserve oil reserves and control its distribution in order to keep oil a viable economic resource for multiple generations. However, while “half of Mexican exports were oil exports by 1921,” oil production had actually declined by 1930 (Rubio 8). Nevertheless, Mexico continued working toward the regulation of private companies in the oil industry.

\(^4\) While US art institutes assisted in the restoration of ancient ruins, the projects were still promoted by the Mexican state, feeding the popularity of Mexican tourist towns and implicitly reifying US impressions of Mexico.
Representing the “Other”

While the Good Neighbor Policy discouraged “negative” portrayals of Latin Americans in US cultural productions, US film and literature continued to portray Latin Americans and, in particular Mexicans, through homogenous representations that romanticized and exoticized Mexican characters as the “other” and perpetuated a narrative of difference and US superiority.5 I believe that romanticized Hollywood representations of Latin America during the 1930s continued in the same vein as representations that were “negative.” According to Pike, while Americans were disillusioned with the promises of modernization (marked by mechanized industry and a speculative free market economy) and urban development during the Great Depression, films such as the 1933 *Flying Down to Rio* “left an ‘impression of irrepressible aeronautical enthusiasm and the limitless possibilities of love and international communication opened up by the new technology’” predicated upon US economic investment in Latin America (112). While Hollywood represented Latin America as an “escapist fantasyland” far distanced from US centers of destitution, many Americans still interpreted these representations as evidence of an “uncivilized” Latin America. For example, Scott L. Baugh notes that the 1934 film *Viva Villa!* was typical of a Good Neighbor Policy representation of the Mexican Revolution, favoring a “kind of benediction of the lead figure of Pancho Villa, who had earlier been viewed as an archvillian” (121). However, as Pike notes, some Americans still saw *Viva Villa!* as representative of a Latin America that “abounded (also) in political demagogues and liars, bloodthirsty dictators or would-be dictators [like Villa] … drunkards, immoral priests” and other persons of questionable morality (114).

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5 According to Edward O. Guerrant, the US developed a cultural policy “in an effort to develop a greater degree of solidarity within the Hemisphere” against the looming power of Nazi Germany (117).
I read Spratling’s *Little Mexico* in the context of Hollywood’s representative practices and the subsequent US audience response in order to elucidate its implications and reproduction of the US national imaginary. Like the films *Flying Down to Rio* and *Viva Villa!*, I believe that Spratling romanticized Mexico and Mexicans for their simplicity and distance from urban corruption while still underscoring Mexico’s position as the “other” relative to the United States. For example, in the vignette “Virgen de la Luz,” Spratling both praises and critiques Doña María who acts as the virgin’s benefactress. While he asserts, “her role is more than that of priest, she is both intercessor and oracle,” Spratling also suggests that Doña María exploits Indo-Mexican pilgrims (138). Situating Doña María’s shrine among others across Mexico, Spratling writes, “The shrines may be frequently brazen inventions, becoming veritable gold mines for their owners. A fancied apparition of a cross on the floor, an unexpected recovery, or a dream like a visitation, provide basis for origin and capitalization” (141). I interpret Spratling’s description of Doña María and ritualized pilgrimages both as an escapist representation of a community far removed from the US epicenters of urban exploitation and as justification for his intervention.

By analyzing *Little Mexico*, I explicate how Spratling understood and communicated Mexicanness through common themes and literary tropes. The structure of the book itself supports the inextricable linkages between earth and people permeating the individual portraits. Organized into two sections, “The Land” and “The People,” respectively, *Little Mexico* intimates that Mexican society and social order is not only dependent on a harmonious relationship with earth, but that it actually precedes the people in the development of Indo-Mexican culture. The land isolates the people from modernity and civilization; the landscape is the natural conduit from which other markers of culture originate.  

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6 In the first portrait, “The Town,” Spratling writes: “[O]ne begins to think of the town itself as a sample of mineralized Mexico … There is something complete and self-contained about the place … Their problems remain
of place and people, reinforcing the veil of authenticity Spratling spreads across his writing. Spratling’s eminence as the expert-observer weaving the individual narratives together; all of the stories contribute to a particular vision of Mexico and Mexicanness that reifies a US national imaginary through difference.

Each story I discuss illustrates a particular aspect of the culture Spratling imagined. Placed within an overarching depiction of pre-modernity and primitiveness, race, sexuality, and class structure coalesce in *Little Mexico* as key elements of Mexicanness. Spratling’s imagined Mexico relies both upon the characteristics of Indo-Mexican life and his own experience as Anglo writer immersed within the community. I use four stories to elucidate the above themes: “Tierra Fria” – the only portrait I use from the first part of *Little Mexico*, “The Land” – helps clarify how Spratling uses descriptions of space and place to establish his representations of Mexico. The spatial displacement of Spratling’s narrative from Mexico City ostensibly distances Taxco, and, by extension, “real” Mexico from the corruption of the capital, but it also reaffirms Taxco’s detachment from 20th century modernization. Next, I examine two stories that illustrate my analysis of race, sexuality, and class. “Virgen de la Luz” and “Santa Señora” capture how Spratling racializes his characters and how sex, class, and gender inform this racialization. Both of these stories are grouped under the heading “Two Catholic Ladies.” These are the only two stories that share a heading, indicating they should be read in context with each other. Lastly, I use “Agrarian” – the first story in “The People” – to explain the paternalism through which Spratling approaches his observations. Additionally, my analysis relies on both Spratling’s narratives and his drawings. Often, the images reveal Spratling’s unspoken biases toward the Indo-Mexicans with whom he resides. Each of his representations of Mexican culture exists

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the same. World economic depressions mean little here and if the exchange goes sky high – it has little to do with them” (7).
within this context of intervention (both by the US and Spratling) and reinforces a spirit of
economic power and by extension, cultural superiority. While economic concerns rarely appear
in *Little Mexico*, Spratling’s descriptions of experience and culture are informed by his economic
status in the town. I attempt to reinsert these concerns into my analyses below.

Through each exploration of the themes of primitiveness, race, sexuality, class, and
paternalism, I illustrate how I understand *Little Mexico’s* position within Spratling’s personal
narrative and the US historical context. All of these issues reinforce a national imaginary that
relies upon the intersections of “power, pain, and domination” and that continually compares
how these concepts function within the US and Mexico to demonstrate qualitative differences
between the (imagined) nation-states.

**Agrarian Pre-Modernity**

Spratling’s rendering of Taxco, the epitomized rural Mexico, is a homogenous landscape
supposedly removed from the corrupt capital. However, the homogeneity of *Little Mexico* is just
as misrepresentative of Mexico and the Mexican citizenry, providing a limited interpretation of
Mexican experience and denying other historical developments within the country. Consistent
with his depictions of race and sexuality within the collection, Spratling’s rural Mexico couches
his dominant bias behind beautiful descriptions of the land. The people, their civilization and
culture originate from the land and life is dependent upon a close connection with nature.
Spratling’s vignettes offer a pre-modern landscape through which he establishes his narrative of
a primitive society. By representing the Taxqueñians as primitive, I believe that Spratling
mobilizes Orientalism to affirm his own cultural superiority.

I understand Orientalism through the work of Edward Said who contends that
Orientalism is a “system of knowledge … for filtering through the Orient into Western

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7 Please refer to above discussions of US intervention in Mexico and Spratling’s mining ventures in Guerrero.
consciousness” (133). Euro-Americans, like Spratling, understand their interactions with and representations of “the Orient” – or, in this case, Mexico – as a member of a dominant society and are constantly repositioned as the superior individual. Said writes that to be a Euro-American studying “the Orient” means to be aware “that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient” (137). In Orientalism & Identity in Latin America, Editor Erik Camayd-Freixas defines Said’s theory as it applies to the Western Hemisphere: “Eurocentric identity was constructed not only through differentiation and exclusion but also by the biased attribution, projection, and transference of negative traits onto its ‘others’” (2).8 Spratling’s depictions demonstrate how negative representations of the “other” displaced the injurious aspects of American society to mobilize the US national imaginary.9 Therefore, I read Little Mexico as a politicized representation of Mexico in which Spratling is situated as the dominant personality and his subjects are inherently inferior.

According to Spratling, the region of Mexico detailed in Little Mexico has ancestral claims to civilizations that far predate Spanish colonization and that are hard to identify. Spratling explains the Taxqueñians’ ancient origins in his vignette “Tierra Fria,” which describes his journey through Tetipac with guide Ysaíás. The mystery veiling all of Guerrero (including Taxco) and its people only supports Spratling’s claim that this was the “real” Mexico, far removed from the northern corruption: “But even if three hundred new archaeological sites a year are discovered in Mexico, this country will remain but slightly known, for a long time to come” (Spratling 58).10 Scientific processes are no match for the secrets of “real” Mexico:

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8 See discussion of “romantic regionalist folklore ethnography” in Chapter 2 for a related discussion of Porter’s projection of violence onto Mexican peoples.

9 For example, Pike suggests that Hollywood representations of “good-hearted racist hacendados south of the border” justified favorable representations of “good-hearted racist southern estate owners” in the US (e.g., Gone with the Wind) (113).

10 Please see a brief discussion of Spratling’s claim that Little Mexico depicted “real” Mexico in the conclusion.
Spratling depicts Mexico as a nation immune to the modern explorations of the 20th century. His introduction to Mexico reaffirms the difference between Mexico and the US. While the US embraced change and technology in order to explain human experience, Spratling depicts Mexico and Mexicanness as incompatible with these developments. Instead, Spratling’s observation of life and tradition ostensibly help elucidate Mexico’s “authentic” culture.

An important aspect of the culture that Spratling articulates is the age of the land on which the culture was built. Spratling understands the people he encounters by framing them alongside Mexico’s ancient civilizations. While the land is old and Ysaiás is young – a boy, according to Spratling – he links each to the other. Spratling writes, “They [the Taxqueñians] think of them [Mexico’s ancestral civilization] as a race of giant builders-in-stone, who lived so long ago that they had nothing to do with what is now Mexico. Whereas, you have only to look at the faces of Tata Luis, of Doña Maria de la Luz, of Ysaiás, in order to realize their background” (Spratling 56). Regardless of the generations separating Ysaiás from the Aztec and Mayan forebears, he is entrenched in the past, both in image and personality. Furthermore, it is Spratling who determines Ysaiás’s lineage, not Ysaiás himself. Spratling has the authority to define the history and culture of Mexico, supplanting the Mexicans’ right to speak for themselves. In this regard, Spratling selectively chooses how to remember Mexican identity for and communicate it to American audiences.

Two sketches reaffirm Spratling’s reading of the Taxqueñians he encounters; appearing on opposite pages within “Tierra Fria,” the sketches, of which Spratling is artist, provide an

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11Here, Spratling suggests that the Taxqueñians do not realize their own link to powerful ancient civilizations. Tata Luis is the protagonist of Spratling’s “Of the Old Regime,” who recounts how the Mexican Revolution impacted Taxco: while the Revolution temporarily disrupted the national progress narrative, residents of Taxco quickly returned to their pre-revolutionary ideals. Like the process by which Dobie elides violence in his ethnographic literature, Spratling, too, suggests the limited impact violence has had on the Taxqueñians.

12As stated in the previous sentence, Ysaiás carries the visage of his ancestors, like all of the people of Taxco. Furthermore, Spratling opens “Tierra Fria” by reminding readers that Ysaiás, as a name, has biblical origins.
ostensibly unaltered representation of Mexicanness. However, by considering the tenets of Said’s Orientalism, I complicate their inclusion in the narrative. As a matching pair, the two images embody past and present. The first image, a sculpted idol, stares back at the reader with pupilless eyes (Fig 1). A square forehead and strong jaw frame the stone face. The idol is Spratling’s ultimate discovery in the mountains of Tierra Fria: upon finding the idol, a member of the company, Don Carmen exclaims, “There, there he is! – do you see him?” (65). Guarding the entrance to an ancient temple holding other archaeological artifacts, the idol is representative of the ancient civilization and proof of the familial link between the Nahua culture (Aztec, in this instance) and the Taxco people. The figure opposite the idol is a perfect match to the ancient stone artifact. A young man with dark hair, the figure is looking with squinted eyes to the right of the page (Fig 2). His slightly softened features provide the only discernable difference between the human and the idol to his left. With rounded cheeks, the man is evidently young, but his scowl and set lips show suspicion and cynicism: he is both young and old. It is not only the stone figures that remain unchanged with the passing of time; the people of Mexico apparently do not change either.

Fig 1 (on right): The Stone Idol that Spratling Sees on his Journey through Tierra Fria (Spratling 58). Fig 2 (on left): A Young Indo-Mexican Resembles his Ancestor-in-Stone (Spratling 59).
Spratling’s historical focus indicates that despite the passing of time, Taxco does not change in terms of landscape or in way of life. Regarding landscape, Spratling’s “Tierra Fria” is a frozen territory on which these people have lived for centuries. Accentuating this deep freeze, Spratling writes, “It is cold. The white mule ahead, with the old man in his ragged blanket, plods on unhurried over fields of brown straw which alternate with areas of flat rock, barren except for lichens” (59). The land, while seemingly inhospitable to life, supports a civilization much older than the rest of Mexico.

However, progress has not accompanied the civilization’s longevity. The lichen itself provides a metaphor for the simplicity of Spratling’s comrades in Taxco. Lichens are unevolved, primitive, and removed from civilization. Fungus and algae combine to create the lichen. Both components resonate with images of decay and stagnation. Lichens grow in abandoned spaces. But, lichens are also organisms that thrive in extreme conditions. The people are resilient, but this resilience is matched by a stubbornness that prevents modernization.

Similar to the lichens, *alacranes* (scorpions) and *coralillos* (poisonous milk snakes) represent a resistance to modernization in “Tierra Fria.” The scorpions and snakes are key figures through which Spratling animalizes Indo-Mexicans. Both figures molt their skin as they grow and both are systematically killed during Spratling’s narrative. The differing ways in which the scorpions and snake are killed reaffirm Spratling’s impression of Taxco’s citizens as primitive, pre-Colombian Indians. He admonishes and admires the people in different spheres; animalization is one of the particular literary techniques he uses to demonstrate his biases toward them.

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13 “Tierra Fria” translates to “cold land” in English.
14 Animalization occurs throughout *Little Mexico*. Even Doña Petra is animalized in her narrative. Spratling writes that she makes “hen-clucking sounds” as she inspect her home (127).
First encountering the scorpions in a cave among the Tetipac Mountains, Ysaías creates a game in which he forces two scorpions into a battle reminiscent of cockfighting. Spratling writes:

With tiny lobster-like pincers they clinch and loosen grips. The tails, loaded with their creamy poison, whip in and out, seeking the opportunity to inject death. At last it happens. The one injected fights clear and departs haltingly, the other disdaining to follow – knowing well his adversary cannot survive for more than a minute. Ysaías is delighted. He pulls the sting off the live one and offers to eat him. No one insists, but he eats him anyhow. (54)

Ysaías ingests the very creature that represents regeneration and rebirth. By consuming the scorpion, Ysaías simultaneously confirms his superiority and primitiveness. He is the invisible architect of their death and he has complete power over them. But, he abuses his power: it is without provocation that Ysaías eats the victor. Ysaías rigged the battle between scorpions with both opponents slated to die at the hands of man. This passage reifies the narrative’s biblical overtones; Ysaías is more than a guide through Tierra Fria. He is a god.

Instead of being horrified, Spratling is attracted to this animal abuse. He partakes in a primitive hunt when the travelers encounter the milk snake in an abandoned house. It is only after the snake exits the house that the men attack the snake. Although the men were first motivated by self-defense, they soon became the offenders and the snake was victim: “The rocks drive him in and we finally kill him – it is working in cramped quarters – with a pole and more stones. Then we throw him outside the shack and sit down on the platform and laugh” (Spratling 63). Spratling is enticed by the folk traditions he encounters on the journey. The traditions are
exciting, but they are also barbaric. The men become more animalized as they become the predators with the poisonous milk snake as their prey.

The passages I have just described are reminiscent of both the colonial invasion of Mexico by Spain and the US cultural intervention in the 20th century. The passages reenact the barbaric nature of invasion, but deny its Euro-American practice. The Mexicans teach Spratling how to attack innocent animals perceived as threats. He is the amateur while the Mexicans are skilled predators. In other words, Spratling projects violence onto the Taxqueñians as a primitive practice. This passage implicitly forgets the skill with which the US enforced (and still enforces) its supremacy through violence and as such reinforces the US national imaginary of the Good Neighbor Policy that framed the US as the benevolent guardian of the Western Hemisphere.

However, “Tierra Fria” also demonstrates the contradictions pervading Little Mexico; while I read the above passages as examples of primitive violence, other passages redeem the Taxqueñians from this violence. Returning to the image of the lichen, the Taxqueñians’ primitiveness indicates geographic isolation from modern society. Throughout Little Mexico, Taxco is framed as the binary opposite of Mexico City. Don Carmen, the old man traveling with Spratling, intimates, “[a] man from Mexico City would be as much a foreigner here as one from London” (62). Mexico City is not “real” Mexico; the city represents modernity’s corrupt powers and distance from traditional values. Instead, “real” Mexicans (read: Indo-Mexicans) follow their own intuition and abandon symbols of modernity. Empty houses populate the horizon in Tierra Fria. Ysaías offers wisdom regarding the houses: “[W]hen people quit a house the little animals come in. And grass roofs are supposed to be specially inviting” (63). Despite their simplicity, the houses represent modernity. Rejecting this symbol of modern comfort, the men prefer to sleep outside: “It is cold and there is only one petate, a straw mat, between us and the rock … It is
better out here … About us now, in place of coralillos and tarantulas, there are only a moon and stars” (Spratling 64). The most primitive life is the most attractive to Spratling and the Indo-Mexicans. Spratling’s narrative reveals the dangers of modernity: with modernity comes the colonization of predators. As such, readers are left with a double reading of the violence in “Tierra Fria.” First, I read Spratling’s Indo-Mexicans as inherently violent – primitive barbarians who initiate violence, even when unprovoked; second, “Tierra Fria” suggests that modernization necessitated Indo-Mexican violence (without the house, the travelers would not have had to compete with the milk snake for shelter). Despite my second reading of “Tierra Fria” in which Spratling romanticizes primitiveness, I believe that both of Spratling’s representations of the Taxqueñians posit them as “others.”

In this atmosphere of difference, Spratling highlights other aspects of Mexican identity that reinforces a narrative of Mexican cultural inferiority. In the next sections, I illustrate how race, sexuality, and class inform Spratling’s *Little Mexico*. By homogenizing Taxqueñians through these traits, Spratling emphasizes how Mexican culture depends upon the character of its people. He relies upon US constructions of race and sexuality that situated the Mexicans as deviants and reminds readers of those to whom the US denied cultural citizenship.

Racialization

Dominating Spratling’s narratives in “The People” are representations of indigenous Mexicans marked through similar physical and behavioral characteristics. Dark skinned, impoverished and primitive, Spratling’s Indo-Mexicans stand in for the entire Mexican citizenry. By racializing his characters as indigenous, Spratling reaffirms the connection between the Taxqueñians and ancient civilizations. The pre-Columbian Indo-Mexicans function as the antithesis to the modernized (albeit, corrupt) US. While I read Spratling’s Mexican racial
imaginary primarily as his effort to maintain a binary opposition between the US and Mexico, it also qualitatively distinguishes the two cultures: Mexicans are inherently inferior to Americans because their race connotes primitiveness.

Typical of Spratling’s stories, “Virgen de la Luz” depicts particular people and spaces that epitomize Mexican culture and society. In the vignette, Spratling describes Doña María’s shrine to the virgin and its role within the Taxco community. The shrine is Taxco’s most important religious site and is part of Indo-Mexican everyday life. Doña María guards the shrine, accepting the pilgrims’ offerings on behalf of the Virgen. Spratling takes care to illustrate the physical appearance of the shrine’s pilgrims while ignoring other aspects of their lives, indicating that race is more important than other identity markers in distinguishing Mexicanness. In this story, Spratling links darkness with civilization; he prefers descriptions of dark people and dark objects through which he implies cultural inferiority. For example, he writes that the shrine “is so dark one must have a candle to make out the retablos. In one corner, the same colour as the sombre walls, sits the Doña María, piously, gravely squinting, occasionally scattering pecking chickens with a movement of her cane” (137-138). In this passage, Spratling establishes the shrine’s darkness before describing the typical Taxqueñian (Doña María) who inhabits the space. Not only is Doña María dark – “the same colour as the sombre walls” – she is old, has poor eyesight and is in close contact with wild chickens.15 Through this description, Spratling marks Doña María as “other.”

Spratling’s Mexican “other” is not only different and opposite from the “self” (i.e., Spratling, as the implied archetypical Anglo-American), the “other” is inferior in terms of their

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15 I believe that the shrine’s non-human inhabitants, including chickens and Doña María’s “horde of cats” remind readers of the relationship between Indo-Mexicans and animals in “Tierra Fria” that establishes Indo-Mexican primitiveness: “Chickens mingle with cats and outside are roped mongrel dogs which snap at one’s back” (Spratling 138, for reference to the cat “horde” see page 142). The animals, especially the dogs, are predatory as they vie for food and territory.
civilization. I argue that *Little Mexico’s* pervading images of darkness connote an unenlightened society, removed from a rational, Euro-American civilization. Spratling writes, “As in all the houses of the poor, there are no windows to her shrine. Only a door” (137). In this passage, I believe Spratling highlights the shrine’s isolation and uses his descriptions of its inaccessibility to critique Mexican society’s backwardness. Later in “Virgen de la Luz,” Spratling questions Doña María’s power: “There is much more here than meets the eye. From where does the Doña María derive and how has she, a woman, achieved her holy office of priestess among a presumably Catholic people? One day she told me, in the same half-persecuted, pious voice with which the Doña Petra also speaks, that she has not been outside the house for twenty-five years” (138). Again, by indicating that Doña María willingly remains in the shrine that he already established as dark, I believe that Spratling suggests that the Taxqueñians willingly choose ignorance over enlightenment.

Spratling most clearly articulates his racialized attitude toward Indo-Mexicans through personal sketches. He casts darkness over the bodies of the Indo-Mexicans and assigns to them a specific bodily comportment. By bodily comportment, I refer to the ways in which Spratling’s representations of the Taxqueñians indicate particular physical characteristics, dress and conduct that racialized the characters as “other.” In his monograph *Coyote Nation*, scholar Pablo Mitchell asserts that “[b]odily comportment was an integral piece of Anglo efforts [in the American Southwest] to claim that Indians and Hispanos were socially inferior and not white” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (5). I believe that Spratling, too, relies on markers of bodily comportment that implicitly identified Indo-Mexicans as inferior, racialized “others” and reified his critique of their backward, unenlightened civilization. For example, as Spratling links Doña María’s skin color with infirmity in the passage I quote above, he links Indo-Mexican physical
difference with specific bodily behaviors to create a racialized “other.” Doña María’s physical weakness (i.e., her bodily comportment) is a manifestation of her racialized inferiority. I discuss three images below to demonstrate how Spratling emphasizes bodily comportment to racialize the Taxqueñians in his stories.

These images provide salient evidence for Spratling’s Eurocentrism: despite the romantic language with which he constructs his vignettes, the images reveal a subordinate Mexican character, vulnerable to exploitation and dependent upon Spratling’s beneficence.¹⁶ I believe that Spratling exposes his dual relationship to his subject through these images. At first glance, these images romanticize the innocence and simplicity of Spratling’s subjects; however, by linking their size, posture and lack of individuality to “primitive” physical characteristics such as dark skin and phenotypical facial features, Spratling reasserts their inferiority and implicitly naturalizes his presence in Taxco.

I use two drawings in “Virgen de la Luz” to help interpret Spratling’s racialization of his subjects. Both figures are young men, with dark hair, somber faces and respectful postures. The first man is standing with his head down-turned and his hat in hand (Fig 3). His sandals and cuffed pants reveal a noticeable color contrast between his dark skin and light clothes. With hunched shoulders, the man appears diminutive; the page’s surrounding blank space accentuates his size. Presumably, he is one of the many Indo-Mexican pilgrims to the virgin’s shrine paying respect to the idol and Doña María. Through this image, Spratling reaffirms his written observations: as the pilgrims approach Doña María, “they stand there humbly with battered

¹⁶These drawings are often uncaptioned: Spratling only identifies the residents he deems important. For example, he captions the image of his godson Atanasio in the vignette “Agrarian,” but does not caption the images of the two men I analyze in this section. Likewise, Spratling also includes drawings of inanimate objects, implying a tenable connection between person and object. I will discuss the conflation between these unnamed Mexicans and inanimate objects further below.
sombreros in their hands” (138). Conversely, the second image is more overt in its depiction of a racialized difference between Anglos and Indo-Mexicans.

The second drawing follows the narrative’s close; through a close inspection of the man’s face, phenotypical features reveal racialized characteristics that resonate with racial inferiority within a US context. Spratling implies that this character is of Asian descent through his phenotypical facial features; in so doing, Spratling links Mexican identity to Asian identity, which was contested in the US imaginary at the time. The man appears seated with his hat placed in front of his feet (Fig 4). In his left hand, he holds a prayer candle; his right arm is draped over his knees. Again, the contrast between clothing and skin color emphasizes the darkness with which Spratling renders the man. Unlike the first figure, whose face is turned away from the reader, this man’s face is visible with distinct features. Arched eyebrows, closed, narrow eyes, and a “Fu Manchu” mustache suggest Asian descent. By rendering the man as both indigenous and Asian, Spratling implicitly Orientalizes the Taxqueñians. He suggests that all non-whites are morally inferior and indistinguishable from each other, justifying their common socio-political disenfranchisement within the US. In *Fit to be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939*, scholar Natalia Molina discusses how official practices in the United States contemporary to the publication of *Little Mexico* racialized Mexicans, Chinese and Japanese workers. Molina contends that while “‘Mexican’ was a category constructed from what it was not: not white, not Chinese, not Japanese,” the way public officials “came to view and treat Mexicans, however, was directly tied to their assumptions about and experiences with L.A.’s Asian residents” (9). While the groups were racialized differently at different times, they all inhabited an “othered” location in the US imaginary. In the 1930s, Mexicans were the racialized descendants of the Asian immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Spratling reifies
this racial position of Mexicans in the US during the 1930s by conflating Mexican and Asian identities in *Little Mexico*. He implicitly rationalizes the denial of cultural citizenship to Mexicans in the US at the time.

According to Mitchell, visual cues informed the joint identity markers of cultural citizenship and whiteness during the early 20th century. He argues that Anglos in New Mexico had to define their own “white” identity against “non-white” Indians and Hispanos in order to maintain their position in a racial hierarchy; Anglos used bodily comportment to assert their whiteness and link light skin (among other physical characteristics and behaviors) with “economic and political power” (Mitchell 5). Likewise, cultural citizenship and the exclusive definition of “American” was (and still is, to a certain degree) tied to notions of whiteness. Anglos could demand the benefits and respect of citizenship because of their “white” identity (Mitchell 6). In *Little Mexico*, Spratling depicts whiteness differently than indigenousness. His representations of whiteness show individuals who stand erect, have light skin, wear formal attire, and look forward rather than avert their eyes. Spratling’s drawing of José de la Borda – the French-Spanish colonizer who Spratling credits as the engineer of “modern” Taxco – is typical of the few illustrations of “whites” in *Little Mexico*. Spratling depicts Borda as a refined European: tall, well-dressed, and literate (Fig 5). Borda stands next to a paned window and wears an embellished overcoat and buckled shoes. With light skin and light, straight hair, Borda contrasts the dark, heavy curtain draped behind him. On the desk at Borda’s side, an inkwell and a quill pen indicate that he is literate, further suggesting that Borda is a man of reason. All of

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17 While Pablo Mitchell’s study is limited to a discussion of New Mexican identity formation, racialization processes and bodily comportment, I believe that his arguments regarding the role of bodily comportment apply to my own analysis. In my conclusion, I offer some reasons why I believe that the borderland (including New Mexico) is absent from Spratling and Porter’s works.

18 Later in this chapter, I discuss the image of Atanasio, Spratling’s godchild, who addresses the audience like Borda.
these markers distinguish Borda from the indigenous Taxqueñians that appear throughout the book.

As I articulated in this chapter’s previous section, Spratling establishes that Indo-Mexicans are primitive through their relationship with the land and animals. “Virgen de la Luz’s” racialized portraits suggest that we should also consider the pilgrims’ bodily comportment, facial features and religious deference to understand how Spratling creates a binary between Indo-Mexicans and Anglos.

Fig 3 (on right): A Man Humbly Stands with Sombrero in Hand (Spratling 139). Fig 4 (on left): A Man Sits Holding His Prayer Candle (Spratling 142).

Fig 5: José de la Borda Stands in a Decorative Room Wearing Ornate Dress (Spratling 9).
In addition to their assumed physical difference from Anglos (and José de la Borda) in terms of bodily comportment and facial features, Spratling’s subjects are racialized “others” because of their religious practice and faith. Dark skinned people have faith in a primitive religion; as such, Spratling links skin color with cultural inferiority in addition to racial inferiority. The worshippers are naïve, aimless and mechanized in “Virgen de la Luz”; they seemingly lack free will and direction, and are unable to protect themselves from antagonistic forces. Instead, they rely on the good graces of an ancient deity: “But the Little Indians who worship at the shrine of the Virgen de la Luz approach her with an immaculate simplicity” (Spratling 140). The people’s primitiveness (simplicity) suggests the primitiveness of the religious practice.

I believe that it is important to complicate the religious theme within “Virgen de la Luz” and within the larger work because Spratling intimately links religion with Indo-Mexican identity. Through this linkage, the Indo-Mexican cultural practice becomes a racial practice; it is one of the many identity markers by which the US constructed Mexico as the “other.” This concept is reiterated in Pablo Vila’s ethnographic study *Border Identifications: Narratives of Religion, Gender, and Class on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. In his study, Vila contends that religion, when read in the context of “region, ethnicity and nation,” is a nodal point through which identity is understood and assigned (1). Catholicism and its derivatives are conflated with Mexicanness, and by extension, Mexican racial identity. However, while Catholicism creates a binary divide between Mexicanness and Americanness, the religious practices across different

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19 Spratling uses the phrase “Little Indians” throughout his book; while Spratling uses the phrase as a term of endearment, it also reinforces the processes of infantilization he employs throughout *Little Mexico*. According to Spratling elite Mexicans also refer Indo-Mexicans in the diminutive: “The people of the towns, the small shopkeepers, the *mestizos*, like to refer to them as the “Mexicanitos” – the Little Mexicans” (17).
20 Other identity markers by which ruling elites and popular media constructed difference between the US and Mexico include bodily comportment (which I discuss above),
regions within Mexico create racial binaries, too (Vila 44-45). Hiearchies are created in which a region’s practice marks their Mexicanness. Northerners understand the idolatry of Southern religious practices as markedly indigenous, not Mexican; and, they correlate Southern pre-Columbian traditions with poverty and primitiveness (Vila 51-52). Instead of romanticizing this practice, Spratling intimates that Doña María has corrupted the religion. Modernization by the Mexican government and greed has distanced the church (or, shrine in this instance) from the purity and innocence of the faith. Spratling notes Doña Maria’s corruption: “That the keepers of these shrines are more or less venal goes without saying … The shrines may be frequently brazen inventions, becoming veritable gold mines for their owners” (141). She manipulates the naïve worshippers for her own benefit as they sacrifice what little they have on the promises of blind faith.

Mexico’s modernization has caused this corruption; however, I believe that Spratling does not critique modernization. He critiques Mexico’s modernization because they are modernizing without the direction of Anglos like himself. When Doña María controls her shrine with payments of gold and oil, she exploits the Indo-Mexican citizens. But, when Spratling built the Taxco silver industry, he benevolently taught the Indo-Mexicans how to share their skill with the world. Through this contradiction, I suggest that Spratling presents a racial hierarchy in Little Mexico in which he is positioned as the racially and culturally superior Anglo-American and in which Indo-Mexicans are his inferior. Additionally, Spratling situates the US against Mexico writ large because Mexico is incapable of modernizing “correctly”: they exploit the impoverished and they have faith in a corrupted religion. In this way, Spratling implicitly

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21 While Vila conducted his study in the 1990s, I believe that his work is still relevant to my project because of the incorporation of Catholicism to a changing US identity during the Great Depression. According to Pike, Catholic-Protestant “divisiveness” weakened during the depression as it became more difficult to distinguish between the two religious practices (48). As such, outward idolatry like Spratling describes in “Virgen de la Luz,” would be unmistakably Catholic and therefore at odds with the transforming religious identities in the US.
supports the US national imaginary of the 1930s that projected its weaknesses upon other nations in order to bolster its own self-image.

In the next section, I show how Spratling continues his narrative of Mexican inferiority through class and sexuality. By presenting a single character in *Little Mexico* who does not overtly identify as Indo-Mexican nor primitive, Spratling illustrates a class structure within his book that he links with sexuality. However, throughout the vignette “Santa Señora” Spratling continues to position its subject as his inferior because she is not an Anglo-American.

**Power, Class, and Sexuality**

While Doña María is powerful among the indigenous pilgrims, she is not the most powerful woman in Taxco because of her religious position. Spratling contends, “She is not of the people, she is of a world apart” (138). Instead, the most powerful woman, and arguably, the most powerful person in Taxco is Doña Petra, the central subject of the vignette “Santa Señora.” Doña Petra, who dresses in all black and lives a solitary life in her old age, only leaves her large home “to step across to the parróquia to confess to the priest or to sit with the Doña Victoria Ybañez and the other old ladies in their special little prayer stalls with their little tin candlesticks and their names all in gilt” (Spratling 126). The wealthy landowner Doña Petra embodies the elite class of Taxco. She is undeniably white. Spratling emphasizes both her whiteness and class status throughout the narrative, indicating that race and class are inextricably linked in Mexico’s social hierarchy. She represents wealthy "small-town capitalist[s] ... who are most fearful of appearance of wealth and spend half their lives in dissimulation of too-evident riches" (Spratling 125-126). She employs Indo-Mexicans to work her land and criticizes them in turn: "it [the indigenous race] existed only to work and produce for the class to which she belonged" (Spratling 132). Three races reside within Spratling’s vignettes in *Little Mexico*; however, only
one race is fit for the ruling class. Race determines class, which, in turn, determines power and good citizenship.

While Doña Petra is ostensibly white and comfortably resides within the ruling class, she and Spratling do not occupy the same place within his Mexican imaginary. While Doña Petra diversifies Spratling’s racial imaginary, Spratling racialized Mexicans differently than Americans. For example, Spratling reveals that Doña Petra has "a few drops of Indian blood" implying her racial inferiority to Spratling and other Anglo tourists to the area (132). Conversely, Spratling is unambiguously white. In the story “Little Professor,” one of Spratling’s subjects, Don Galindo, asks Spratling about his skin color: “[Don Galindo] asks if everyone in my country is as pale as I am, and I tell him, much paler” (196). Spratling describes the US as a white nation, devoid of ethnic and racial diversity. While Spratling does not flaunt his whiteness, Doña Petra successfully denies her Indo-Mexican ancestry because she does not physically or affectively resemble her dark-skinned counterparts. While the Indo-Mexicans are unpretentious, simple and naïve, Doña Petra, with her blonde hair and fair skin “is very dignified and very quiet. Her bearing bespeaks the accumulated importance of seventy years of being rich and also maiden. She is fastidious” (Spratling 126). Spratling praises Doña Petra’s moral integrity (chastity) and wealth. But, he also indicates that she maintains this aura through hard work. Unlike Spratling, Doña Petra’s morality is not natural. She denies her true identity – her Indo-Mexican identity – in order to belong to Mexico’s ruling class. Spratling’s naturalization of his

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22 Indo-Mexicans, mestizo/as and white Taxqueñians compose Little Mexico’s racialized population. As I described in the previous section of this chapter, Indo-Mexicans dominate the racial imaginary. Spratling distrusts mestizo/as because of their racial ambiguity. In this section, I show how whiteness and class-based power are linked.

23 I will take up this issue further in the section below, “Euro-American Paternalism.” Briefly, Spratling’s Little Mexico creates a Mexico reliant upon the generosity and benevolence of Anglo visitors like himself, perpetuating a narrative of difference and of US cultural superiority. Spratling does critique some Anglo tourists, however – those who do not choose to experience Mexico as he does. He writes, “They are full of disappointment that the ‘natives’ do not wear breech clouts. They insistently refer to all the things in the market as ‘native’ – never just Mexican. Of course by this they mean the things or people one examines at a place called a resort” (172)
whiteness and sexual normativity comports with his narrative of economic success in Taxco: providence facilitated Spratling’s innovative intervention in Taxco’s mining industry, rather than capitalist practices (such as negotiating with Taxqueñians for wage and work hours). Conversely, Spratling suggests that Doña Petra came to power through her apparent whiteness and exploitative practices.

I believe that Spratling critiques Doña Petra’s path to economic stability because it competes with his own business interests in Taxco. Having inherited land shares and investments from her uncle, Doña Petra upended his business model and replaced it with her own, breaking ties with the town’s traditional economic infrastructure. Instead of following her uncle’s business model, which Spratling admires, Doña Petra refuses to oversee the building and development of her property. Spratling writes, “He [Doña Petra’s uncle] was a sort of pioneer and believed in hard work and constructive methods … The thing that most profoundly interests the Doña Petra is what the yearly rental of the lands is going to bring her in good hard pesos” (130). Spratling describes her as cold and greedy, but she remains powerful and revered by other Taxqueñians.

Spratling’s characterization of Doña Petra is representative of Spratling’s uneasy relationship with capitalism and modernization throughout Little Mexico. Capitalist enterprise facilitates his own financial stability in Mexico, yet he critiques its proliferation among Indo-Mexicans. As such, he creates a social hierarchy in which class also marks Indo-Mexicans as “others.” I maintain that this class hierarchy depends upon the racialized difference I describe above. Race consumes all other identity markers under its umbrella of inferiority because it is the most visible point of difference. However, Spratling’s descriptions of class structures reaffirm his right to intervene in Taxco and contribute to a larger US narrative of benevolent intervention in Mexico. I believe that Spratling’s discussion of class and the corrupt practices of Mexico’s

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24 See long quote I cite on pages 29-30 that summarizes Spratling’s business model.
elite (Doña María and Doña Petra) confirms a narrative that links racial identity with economic competence and vice versa.

Class is not the only social factor that relies upon race in Spratling’s works; he also emphasizes sexuality. In “Santa Señora,” sexual deviance relies upon exaggerated racial difference between whites and Indo-Mexicans, too. As I intimate above, Doña Petra does not claim her Indian blood (and is wealthy) and is described as chaste, indicating that Spratling correlates whiteness with normative sexuality. Conversely, the men she attracts are lascivious – they are dark and they cannot restrain their sexual desires. And, the sexual passions of the Indo-Mexican men are not admissions of love, only lust.

In order to illustrate the lustfulness of the Indo-Mexican men, Spratling allots a significant amount of space describing Doña Petra’s youthful encounter with a man near one of her village properties, offering an explanation for her retreat from society. He reifies a social hierarchy through the sexuality of Doña Petra and her suitor. The sexual innocence of the former is countered and magnified by the sexual promiscuity of the latter. Through Spratling’s tale, the suitor’s sexuality becomes inherent in his person.

In this narrative, sexuality is linked with youth and young age; with age comes self-control and restraint. However, through the processes of infantilization in Little Mexico, the Indo-Mexicans are always rendered as children. Biological age does not determine how Indo-Mexicans are described across the vignettes. Already, I have noted that Spratling often refers to Taxco residents as “Little Mexicans,” and he makes no exception in “Santa Señora.” Describing Doña Petra’s suitor, Spratling writes, “[h]e belonged to that class of Mexicans whose faces are like Aztec masks, beardless, dark, like fine bronze. He had black, mysterious and childishly

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25 While Porter also uses the mechanisms of infantilization, she does not create as distinct a connection between youth and sexuality.
observant eyes ... He considered himself the equal of any *catrin*, as the mountain people like to refer to people who wear town clothes” (133, first emphasis mine). Here, Spratling emphasizes the man’s racial features and his youthful demeanor.

Spratling also uses a metaphor to connect sexuality and race. Through this metaphor, Spratling effectively casts the young man as an unthinking, sexually motivated being. In a message etched in stone the man writes to Doña Petra, “may the day be not long delayed when your body be joined with my body” (134). As I stated above, lust, not love, motivates the man as he did not know Doña Petra – he only saw her walking through the village. His advances are unrequited, however: “She [Doña Petra] had never been – nor did she intend to be – in contact with the soil” (134, emphasis mine). Because of his Aztec racial ancestry, the man is earth. He is basic and primitive. Doña Petra is his superior, justifying her refusal of his advances.

It is also evident that Doña Petra infantilizes the Indo-Mexicans, too; while Spratling is more ambiguous in his use of “Little Mexicans,” Doña Petra clearly infantilizes the Indo-Mexicans as an act of condescension. According to Spratling, Doña Petra calls them “Inditos,” ostensibly reaffirming Spratling’s own observations in Taxco. She is condescending toward the impoverished members of her community because her socio-economic privilege gives her the right to do so. To close the narrative, Doña Petra asserts, “[T]hese little Mexicans are not only primitive but are given to ‘natural impulses’” (Spratling 135). Doña Petra conflates age, race and sexuality within the framework of culture and civilization through her final critique of Indo-Mexicans. Likewise, her comments assure the binary between herself and other Taxco residents.

As I indicate above, Doña Petra remains chaste throughout the narrative; arguably, her

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26 The stone, which does not decay, reminds readers of the permanency of the man’s sexual deviance.
27 Of course, soil is also the fecund habitat for all plant life – Spratling remains ambiguous toward Indo-Mexicans in this passage.
integrity is assured through her old age. She does not exhibit the weaknesses of sexual abandon Spratling associates with Taxco’s youth. Spratling not only ties Doña Petra’s purity to her age, however, he links it to her whiteness. Doña Petra’s purity is evidenced not only by her thoughts, but also by the environment she inhabits. Her house is impeccable, despite her maids’ inadequacy. Only Doña Petra’s constant oversight prevents the accumulation of “soil”: “[T]he Doña Petra will come along … and touch the palm of her soft white old hand to the surface just swept and order the creature, usually very young and dark and humble, to repeat the process yet once again” (Spratling 127). Maintaining her whiteness is an active process and her social status remains tenuous. Throughout “Santa Señora,” Spratling reiterates Doña Petra’s unnatural role as a member of the ruling class. Again, I believe that Spratling includes these details because he needs to constantly reaffirm his own status in Taxco as both American and industrialist.

By linking race, class, and sexuality Spratling reifies a cultural binary that supports the social hierarchy advanced by the US national imaginary at the time. Spratling manufactures the binary through his particular choice of narratives and subjects. In both “Santa Señora” and “Virgen de la Luz,” Spratling represents Mexican culture through female figures who reveal important elements of Spratling’s Mexican imaginary. These women are arbiters of the cultural binary within the town and to a certain extent, within Mexico. Doña Maria is indicative of the primitive, superstitious Indo-Mexicans who populate the lower classes while Doña Petra represents the modern, shrewd, white, ruling class. However, they both embody an imagined community against which the US posited itself in order to establish a national imaginary founded

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28 The portrait “Tata Luis” supports this link. The nominal subject is an old man, “nearly ninety,” according to Spratling (159). However, readers do not know of his adult life; the entire narrative recounts his youth during the early years of Díaz’s regime: “His mind harked back to the time of Carlota and Maximiliano and to the days when he was a child selling mangoes in the plaza” (159). It is Tata Luis himself who prefers to reminisce about his past rather than discuss his present, substantiating Spratling’s own fascination with youth across the book.

29 Furthermore, by gendering the ruling class as women, Spratling contributes an additional justification for US intervention. By representing men as lascivious, sex-crazed youths (such as the male figure in “Santa Señora”) and
on a narrative of power, economic stability and cultural superiority.

Euro-American Paternalism

As I intimate during my analysis of “Santa Señora,” Spratling racializes Mexican characters differently from Americans so that all Mexicans, regardless of their whiteness or modernity, remain culturally inferior to Spratling and other Euro-Americans. While Spratling never explicitly posits his own racial identity against those of his subjects, he implicitly establishes his whiteness through paternalism: he brings Taxco both cultural and economic development, replacing Mexico City as a purveyor of modernity. As such, Spratling reconciles Taxco modernization projects under an aura of US cultural superiority. Indo-Mexicans are made amenable to the US national imaginary – an extension of US ideals abroad; Spratling literally whitens the Taxqueñians he meets within the pages of Little Mexico. He frames his intervention in Taxco as benevolent, using language reticent of the non-interventionist rhetoric of the Good Neighbor Policy. Both the whitening of characters and Spratling’s altruistic reputation illustrate that despite his romanticization of indigenous primitivism, he maintains cultural dominance.

He expresses paternalism most often through his infantilization of the Indo-Mexicans I illustrated in my reading of “Santa Señora”; however, Spratling carries the paternalism narrative further in “Agrarian.” In this vignette, Spratling becomes the figurative surrogate father of Taxco’s next generation. The dynamic between Mexican child and Anglo father is saliently illustrated through his fraternal relationship with Juanito and his son, Spratling’s godson Atanasio. A gardener, Juanito is an Indo-Mexican of the same class of people Doña Petra abhors, “considerably darker” than the Spanish colonials in Taxco and “completely in love with

the powerful women as exceptionally religious (which again connotes irrational belief systems), Spratling suggests that Mexico is unfit for self-governance and that US intervention (and his own) is an act of benevolent paternalism. 30 This framework of benevolent intervention is continued in Spratling’s other endeavors as silversmith and “adopted” Taxqueñian.
the soil” (Spratling 94). Like the passages in “Santa Señora” that allude to Doña Petra’s disdain for “Inditos,” Spratling reiterates the connection between Indo-Mexicans and soil. Soil nurtures life, but it is not life itself. And, respectable people like the Doña Petra distance themselves from it; they do not foster “love” for the earth. While Spratling appreciates that soil nurtures civilization, he still uses it as a metaphor for the primitiveness of the Indo-Mexicans. By conflating Juanito with “soil,” Spratling infantilizes and dehumanizes Juanito, reinforces the racial inferiority of Indo-Mexicans, and implicitly supports his paternalist intervention in Taxco.

Conversely, Spratling’s treatment of Atanasio illustrates how differently he views his own heir. Spratling’s constant presence in the child’s life makes him whiter than his biological father; Spratling protects the boy from the negative connotations he assigns to darkness. As Atanasio’s godfather, Spratling takes pride in the infant, marking every small achievement on the boy’s part: “I listen to the things the child has almost said” (Spratling 95). Instead of embracing tradition’s preservation, Spratling, in this instance, looks forward to growth and development. Spratling can truly offer Atanasio a promising future as a descendent of the culturally superior Anglo-American; Spratling displaces Juanito as Atanasio’s “true father” and Atanasio becomes an intercessor between Anglo civilization and indigenous primitivism.

Spratling’s artistic rendering of the child most accurately depicts the whiteness he sees in Atanasio. Unlike the other images of Indo-Mexicans throughout Little Mexico, Atanasio is shaded much lighter in his portrait, suggesting he is of a different race (Fig 6). His hair is almost blonde and he addresses the audience directly. The other Indo-Mexicans, including Doña Petra, avert their eyes, but Atanasio does not. He is Spratling’s equal and can return his gaze. Furthermore, Atanasio laughs in the drawing, contrasting the somber disposition of the other Indo-Mexicans Spratling observes. This emotional lightness matches the lightness of his skin,
reaffirming the link between physical appearance, emotion, and intellect that I described earlier in this chapter. While dark skin connotes naivety and simplicity, white skin indicates intelligence and contentment.

Fig 6: Spratling’s Godson, Atanasio (Spratling 98).

I believe that this brief reading of “Agrarian” helps articulate the issues of primitivism, race, class, and sexuality that I have discussed thus far in this chapter. As Spratling encourages Atanasio’s development and growth he simultaneously stifles the cultural development of Taxco. He does this because the Indo-Mexicans of Juanito’s generation are racially inferior – they cannot progress like Atanasio. Instead, Spratling romanticizes their simplicity and innocence for his audiences while criticizing their religion, modernization and sexuality. By doing this, Mexico is no longer seen as a nation that can threaten the appearance of US economic or cultural stability. Mexico is a nation inherently inferior to the US and it will continue in this tradition unless Anglo-Americans like Spratling show Mexicans how to modernize. And, through this process, the Mexicans will be assimilable to American cultural and economic ideals.31

Conclusion

In this chapter, I illustrated how William Spratling’s book Little Mexico contributes to a

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31 Of course, this applies to Mexicans within the US, too. By intervening in this inferior culture, the US can assimilate Mexican-Americans to its imagined community and by extension, its national imaginary.
US national imaginary in the 1930s. First, I explained how Spratling’s personal intervention in Mexico mirrored the Good Neighbor Policy, a cultural and economic program that justified US dominance in the Western Hemisphere while articulating a narrative of benevolence to US audiences. I argue that Spratling’s work implicitly reifies US cultural and racial dominance because it selectively represents a homogenous Mexican experience that elides certain developments such as Mexican economic modernization, the violence of the Mexican Revolution, his own self-interest in Mexico, and most importantly, US interests in Mexican affairs. Additionally, through *Little Mexico*, Spratling is able to project the contradictions and flaws within US society onto Mexico – racial “others,” pre-modern barbaric violence, and elite class power may perhaps appear within Spratling’s Mexico, but these social issues were present in the US, too.

Using evidence from four vignettes in *Little Mexico*, I attempted to show how Spratling uses multiple points of representation, all of which contribute to a homogenized narrative of Mexico and Mexicanness. By reading against the narrative of authenticity that his biographers have applied to *Little Mexico*, I demonstrate that despite his integration into the Taxco community, Spratling continued to depict his subjects as “others” while he understood himself as a paternal caregiver. He often critiques Mexican customs and economic strategies without realizing his own complicity in perpetuating those same practices. And, by choosing a single narrative of Mexican identity, he creates an uncomplicated narrative against which the US can compare itself. The binary is firm and there are no gaps through which Mexico can threaten US superiority.

The individual components of my analysis not only demonstrate how Spratling constructed Mexican identity and culture, but how I read the processes of selective forgetting as
support of the US national imaginary in the 1930s. Spratling both effaces and highlights comparisons between the US when they fit his vision. For example, as I stated above, by suggesting that Taxco – rural Mexico – is “real” Mexico, Spratling denies Mexico its modernization, which reifies US cultural supremacy. Conversely, when racializing his characters in “Virgen de la Luz,” Spratling conflates the social position of mestizo/as in Mexico and the practice of “passing” among African Americans in the US, signifying his negative opinion of both. He describes Señorita Otilia, Doña María’s niece and a mestiza: “Otilia … [is] at that ugly stage of social development where one tries to forget Indian tradition in order to become gente decente. It is a process akin to ‘crossing the line’ among the habitants of Harlem. Neither extreme is bad, but the middle stage is one of presumption and a bad mixture of native with bourgeois taste” (Spratling 140, emphasis in original). As such, these depictions of Mexico and Mexicanness complied with a US national imaginary that denied cultural citizenship to Mexican-American and African-Americans, claimed cultural and economic dominance over Latin America and understood the US nation-state as an impermeable sovereignty of progress and modernity.

In the next chapter, I continue my analysis of a US national imaginary through an interrogation into the work of Katherine Anne Porter. Through her fiction, she, like Spratling, created a homogenous representation of Mexico and Mexicanness that supported a narrative of US superiority. I will highlight the differences between her work and Spratling’s in an attempt to demonstrate how these two authors with ostensibly different intents both project a veil of otherness across Mexico. I hope that by thinking of these two authors in relation to each other, this project elucidates the role literature played in reifying the ideals and values of an imagined nation-state.
CHAPTER TWO: KATHERINE ANNE PORTER AND THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN FAN AND FICTION

Introduction

“I am perfectly certain that my time in Mexico was one of the very important times of my life. I think it influenced everything I did afterward” (Stout 34, from Porter, “The Mexico I Knew”).

While she does not claim the same intimacy with Mexico as William Spratling, Katherine Anne Porter’s fiction similarly helps communicate the 1930s US national imaginary I recognize in this project. Through an analysis of the literary techniques and themes she employs in her stories about Mexico, I further develop how period literature supported the national imaginary. There are several thematic similarities between Porter’s work and Spratling’s; however, she uses different methods to achieve her thematic arc. First, like Spratling, Porter implicitly situates Mexico and Mexicanness against US cultural values. But, unlike Spratling, she does not concentrate on a single Mexican community or experience; she represents multiple experiences that contribute to an ostensibly heterogeneous Mexican narrative. Nevertheless, Porter’s Mexico is qualitatively different from the US. A second similarity between the two authors is their depictions of race, class, and sexuality within Mexico. Both authors use these interwoven elements in order to articulate Mexican identity. Spratling and Porter racialize Mexicans as indigenous primitives and through descriptions of animalization and infantilization upon which they build descriptions of impoverishment and transgressive sexuality. In Porter’s stories, these elements inherently suggest that Mexicans are inferior to Anglo-Americans because of the ways in which they correlate with personal and/or societal failures; death, imprisonment, and the Mexican Revolution pervade all of Porter’s stories as symbols of the failures of Mexican society.¹

¹ For example, in the story “María Concepción,” the character María Rosa who Porter describes in terms of animalization and infantilization meets an untimely death: “María Rosa had eaten too much honey and had had too
In order to analyze Porter’s contribution to the US national imaginary, I first position her work with the cultural front, a contemporary artistic movement that combined leftist political activism with popular cultural expression. I contend that although Porter’s fiction aligns with the practices of the cultural front, it still reaffirms a conservative US national imaginary that posited the US against Mexico and Anglo-Americans against Mexican-Americans in a hierarchical relationship. By describing how her stories supported the liberal cultural front before illustrating how her stories supported a conservative US national imaginary, I show that the US national imaginary did not solely depend upon unquestionably positive representations of the “self” and negative representations of the “other.” While Porter’s work primarily aligns with the cultural front, there are certain elements in her narratives that implicitly reproduce the US national imaginary.

Throughout the chapter, I thread a discussion of “objectivity” into my analyses in order to reaffirm the importance of Porter’s aesthetic choice in creating Mexican experience. By creating a documentary aesthetic, Porter assumes authority and an apparently “authentic” Mexican narrative. I complicate this aesthetic choice – which many cultural front artists used – to frame Porter’s depictions of Mexico and Mexicanness and to highlight how the narratives comport with the US national imaginary during the 1930s. Furthermore, I consider this simulated objectivity through the practice of selective forgetting. Porter obfuscates the power she and her characters have in shaping the representations of Mexicanness to American audiences. I begin with a closer examination of how Porter uses tropes of objectivity to organize her racialized Mexico. Then, I move into the more specific ways Porter casts Mexico as the “other” of the US national imaginary. First, I look at how race and sexuality indicate Mexican cultural inferiority. I then

much love. Now she must sit in hell, crying over her sins and her hard death forever and ever” (28). I continue to discuss María Rosa’s symbolic death later in this chapter.
look at how violence expressed through representations of the Mexican Revolution justifies US cultural intervention and reaffirms US cultural hegemony. I use three of Porter’s stories to accomplish this chapter’s tasks: “Hacienda,” “María Concepción,” and “Flowering Judas.” Porter included each of these stories in the 1935 anthology *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*, published following “Hacienda’s” 1934 release. While I do not interrogate Porter’s entire bibliography, or even all of her Mexican narratives, these stories provide a fecund resource for investigating the ways Porter’s stories support a US national imaginary in the early 1930s.

*Cultural Front Values*

As I indicate above, Porter’s work aligns with the values of the cultural front. She critiques the dehumanizing processes of modernization and US cultural hegemony and sympathizes with the Mexican Revolution and disenfranchised Indo-Mexicans. In his book *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Michael Denning defines the cultural front as both “the terrain of cultural struggle … and the alliance of radical artists and intellectuals who made up the ‘cultural’ part of the Popular Front,” a Communist Party movement (xix). According to Denning, the cultural front was an artistic reaction against the corruption of the modern economic system. Often hailing from the American middle class, cultural front artists saw in literary modernism possibilities for linking “sexual and artistic radicalism with sympathies for the revolutions in Mexico” (Denning 28). After 1929, however, these dreams for aesthetic experimentation within a system of economic machination crashed with the distressing reality of the Great Depression. Left with capitalist exploitation and “modernist disenchantment,” cultural front artists represented the anxieties and contradictions of 1930s through their artistic practice (Denning 29). In order to demonstrate how Porter levied her critiques against exploitative “Fordist” modernization, I examine how she employed literary
modernism in her stories.

Porter uses Southern modernist stylistic techniques to level a critique against capitalism and US cultural hegemony. Several modernist themes I recognize across her stories are important to note here. Representative of Porter’s scholars, Darlene Unrue states that Porter examined the “illusions to which persons cling. Often these are ideals that seem in themselves to be truths, and they are clutched as obsessively as if they were the end-all of human life … [but are] not grounded in the reality of chaotic human life” (*Truth* 10). For example, in “María Concepción,” the titular character’s newborn son dies while her husband is at war with his mistress María Rosa in tow.² By the end of the narrative, María steals the newborn baby of her husband’s lover, killing María Rosa in the process. Throughout the entire story, María compares herself with María Rosa, always framing herself as the better woman: “She kept saying to herself, ‘When I was a young girl like María Rosa, if a man had caught hold of me so, I would have broken my jar over his head.’ She forgot completely that she had not resisted even so much as María Rosa, on the day that Juan had first taken hold of her” (“María” 12). This narrative reveals María’s weaknesses: in the most basic reading of the narrative, María is a woman desperate for a faithful husband and healthy child who turned to violence to get what she wants and disremembers the similarities between herself and her victim. However, I believe that readers are also supposed to sympathize with María, a woman who tries to make sense of the awful injustice done to her by clinging to her fantasies of a happy family. Porter describes María Concepción’s behavior after she murders María Rosa: “She jerked with the involuntary recoil of one who receives a blow, and the sweat poured from her skin *as if the wounds of her whole life were shedding their salt ichor*” (21, emphasis mine). This passage indicates that María’s violent outburst was not just a

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² A note on the usage of the name “María” throughout this chapter: I only use the shortened “María” when discussing María Concepción. I always refer to María Rosa by her full name.
reaction to her husband’s affair, but to an entire life of pain and disempowerment. Through her characterization of Maria, Porter asks readers to empathize with a woman who reclaims power in a misogynist society while illustrating the similarities between Maria’s ostensibly “primitive” culture and the “civilized” culture of the US.

Unrue also asserts that Porter “sees’ meaning in life through a sense of order that is founded on general principles … [but] moved closer to Hawthorne and Melville in her preoccupation with human frailty, human limitation, and the human capacity for evil, all of which she considered fundamental laws within the natural universe” (Truth 7). Through her work, Porter considered how the above themes interacted with and influenced the systems of power she abhorred. For example, Laura, the protagonist of “Flowering Judas,” symbolizes Porter’s critique of “benevolent” US intervention in Mexico. Laura’s antagonist in the story, the “skilled revolutionist” Braggioni, hails her as a cultural interloper, stating, “‘I am tempted to forgive you for being a gringa. Gringita!’” (“Flowering” 140-141, emphasis in original). By calling Laura “gringa” twice in the story, Braggioni signifies that she is both American and that her national identity is central to her personal identity. Laura clearly displays flaws that illustrate Porter’s critique of US interference in Mexico during and following the Mexican Revolution. Laura supplied the tools (drugs) that caused Eugenio’s (a symbolic revolutionary) self-destruction: She admits, “‘He had taken all the tablets I brought him yesterday. He said he took them because he was bored’” (“Flowering” 157). While Laura does not directly cause the Revolution’s (or revolutionary’s) failure, she negatively influences the Revolution’s outcome. Through Laura, Porter critiques US intervention and reveals the problems of Western

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3 Later in “Flowering Judas,” Braggioni tells Laura, “‘You think you are so cold, gringita!’” linking Laura’s stoic disposition to her American identity (152).
imperialism and modernization.⁴

Coalescing with Porter’s critique of US intervention and cultural hegemony are her sympathetic representations of Mexicans, especially those negatively affected by the Mexican Revolution. Stout places Porter’s work in conversation with the cultural front, asserting that Porter was sympathetic to cultural revolutions around the globe: “[Porter] stopped regarding Mexico and Mexicans from a northern, Anglo perspective … and adopted a perspective anchored in Mexico itself … identify[ing] with Mexico’s people and view[ing] gringos satirically, as intruders” (30). I, too, see this theme in Porter’s stories. By identifying with Mexicans dispossessed by the Mexican Revolution, Porter illustrates her disillusionment with post-Revolution Mexico. According to Stout, Porter became disillusioned when “she came to believe that the social revolution she witnessed there [in Mexico], from which she had hoped so much, had failed and that the powerful were continuing and would continue to exploit the powerless” (34). The Mexican Revolution did not usher in a democratic social system, nor did it reduce the inequalities between the rich and poor. Instead, the Mexican state continued exploitative political and economic practices and symbols of modernity intertwined with structures of oppression. Porter responds to these failures by embracing characters that are symbols of pre-Revolution Mexico and critiquing those who represent the “new,” but invariably corrupt Mexican state.

For example, in “Hacienda,” Porter sympathizes with the character Carlos Montaña, “the Failure,” whose career as a singer-songwriter unceremoniously ended “ten years ago,” coinciding with the end of the Mexican Revolution (263). According to Betancourt, a cultural advisor for the Mexican government, Montaña’s failure is innate to his person, rather than an effect of post-Revolution politics: “I must say he looks worse today than usual. He slipped and

⁴ Additionally, Porter explores how modern technologies, modes of transportation and communication, war, and sexuality (especially female sexuality) affect individuals and societies.
hurt himself in the bathtub this morning’’ (‘‘Hacienda’’ 263). Betancourt suggests that Montaña’s incompetency prevents him from even managing everyday tasks. In turn, ‘‘Hacienda’s’’ narrator – Porter’s double – explicates Betancourt’s aside: ‘‘It was as if this accident were another point against Carlos, symbolic proof of the fatal downward tendency in his character’’ (263). Through the narrator’s comment, Porter reveals the absurdity of Betancourt’s critique; to the narrator, Betancourt represents the biases of a neo-imperial Mexican state that does not appreciate pre-revolutionary Mexican culture.

Furthermore, I believe that Montaña is a symbol for pre-revolutionary culture in ‘‘Hacienda.’’ In the course of the story, he produces a corrido, a Mexican folk ballad through which he represents a ‘‘truth’’ of Mexican experience; just as the corrido’s lyrics represent ‘‘the point of view of the dispossessed, to be sung among them,’’ Montaña’s post-Revolution life represents a larger narrative of the ‘‘dispossessed’’ within Mexico (Limón 50). Porter asserts that ‘‘[t]he corrido is … a word-of-mouth tradition which renews itself daily in the heroic, sensation or comic episodes of the moment, an instantaneous record of events, a moment caught in the quick of life’’’’ (qtd. in Perry 156). In this passage, Porter admires the tradition of the corrido – she recognizes the ballads as a genuine, rich cultural form. By extension, Montaña, who produces the corrido, symbolizes Mexico’s rich cultural past: Citing Américo Paredes, José Limón writes, ‘‘by the 1930s, the great corrido tradition of ballads … was at an end, the casualty of a society no longer in open resistance and one also willing to permit the commercialization of the corrido’’ (86). Therefore, by evoking the corrido through the figure of Montaña, Porter grieves for a national tradition ostensibly lost in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution. Again, this suggests Porter’s disillusionment with the Revolution and her support of the ‘‘failed’’ pre-revolutionary Mexican culture and its producers.
Additionally, Porter suggests that neo-imperial cultural influences are responsible for Montaña’s plight. Her description of Betancourt’s “success” evidences her criticisms of post-Revolution cultural imports:

Betancourt had spent his youth unlocking the stubborn secrets of Universal Harmony by means of numerology, astronomy, astrology, a formula of though-transference and deep breathing, the practice of will-to-power combined with the latest American theories … which are, from time to time, so successfully introduced into California. From this material he had constructed a Way of Life which could be taught to anyone, and once learned led the initiate quietly and surely toward Success. (“Hacienda” 264)

I believe that Betancourt, as a representative of the Mexican government, acts as a foil to the culturally “authentic,” yet depressed figure of Montaña. Porter dismisses neo-imperial Mexican culture as a ridiculous series of changing trends and critiques how Betancourt uses it to judge the inferiority of Montaña. She writes, “Carlos had always been contemptuous of the External Laws. He had always simply written his tunes without giving a thought to the profounder inferences of music … He, Betancourt, had many times warned Carlos. It had done no good at all. Carlos had gone on inviting his own doom” (“Hacienda” 265). In this passage, Betancourt is condescending and does not value what Montaña has contributed to Mexican society. However, as Robert L. Perry asserts, “despite the continual bustling about of ‘successful’ people like Betancourt … Carlos is the only person in the course of the story who gets anything done: he composes a ballad, and a good one at that” (156). Again, this illustrates Porter’s critique of post-Revolution Mexico. Through her representations of Montaña and Betancourt, Porter frames “authentic” pre-revolutionary cultural forms as productive contributions to Mexican society and discredits neo-imperial culture in the process.
Porter’s character study of Montaña and Betancourt clearly demonstrates how “Hacienda” aligns with the work of the cultural front. She critiques a superficial neo-imperial Mexican culture and its arbiters (like Betancourt) who encourage its appropriation throughout Mexico and Latin America. And, she sympathizes with Montaña, with whom the narrator identifies: “I supposed we had all changed somewhat after ten years” (“Hacienda” 261). Despite Porter’s censure of American hegemony through Laura and of neo-imperialist Mexican culture through Betancourt, and her sympathy of oppressed figures like Carlos Montaña and María Concepción, which illustrate her cultural front values, other aspects of her stories reaffirm Euro-American cultural hegemony.  

Reproducing US Cultural Hegemony

In this chapter, I reconcile Porter’s fidelity to the cultural front with American hegemony by focusing on the particular ways in which she represents Mexico and Mexicanness. Like Spratling, who claimed Mexico as his adopted home, yet still represented Mexico and Mexicanness through a Eurocentric lens and justified US interventionist practices, Porter reaffirms a US national imaginary that implies US cultural superiority and Mexican cultural inferiority. Several elements are important to note here: first, while Porter’s Anglo characters are fallible, they are powerful. Porter grants her Anglo characters power unobtainable by her Mexican characters: she gives them a voice to narrate the events within each story – it is their perspective that matters. For example, although “Flowering Judas’s” protagonist Laura delivers illicit drugs to Eugenio that result in his death, she remains the only character to whom Porter gives voice. Furthermore, even in “María Concepción,” where Porter employs third-person

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5 Denning’s discussion of “cultural nationalism” is also relevant here. He writes that these movements “emphasiz[ed] the distinctive histories of the peoples of the United States” indicating that the cultural front’s romanticization of global social revolutions was supplemented by the legitimation of multiple ways of being within the US (Denning 34).
narration, Anglo-American Porter has the power to tell and re-tell the story.⁶ I believe that Porter criticizes a hegemonic US presence in Mexico, but she does not reflect upon her own role translating Mexicanness to US audiences as author and cultural nomad.⁷ Lastly, the settings of Porter’s stories influence how I interpret them. Set during or in the immediate aftermath of the Mexican Revolution and within Mexico City (e.g., “Flowering Judas”), Porter conveys Mexicanness through narratives of violence. These elements – narrative voice, authorship, and setting – all subvert her critique of US hegemony and the failures of the Mexican Revolution. As I explain above, Porter’s fiction aligns with the motives and practices of the cultural front, but the power held by herself as author and Anglo characters as narrators undermines her seemingly positive representations of Mexico.

Porter’s stories, like Spratling’s, evidence Orientalism; despite her various critiques of the US, Porter still repositions the US as the dominant nation in a hierarchical relationship with Mexico and represents Mexicans as “others.”⁸ Her narratives resemble the formula of Limón’s “romantic-regionalist-folklore ethnographer,” revealing that Porter’s work is implicitly linked to US cultural biases. Not only did Porter ostensibly communicate the “‘authentic’ genius and spirit of the ‘folk,’” she projected the problems of US (and Texan) society onto her Mexican subjects (Limón 51). I return to an analysis of “María Concepción” to examine these themes. Through the death of María Rosa, I believe that “María Concepción” aligns with the work of J. Frank Dobie who typifies romantic regionalist ethnography. According to Limón, Dobie constructs a “rhetorical apologia” for the violence on the Texas-Mexico border in his 1929 book A Vaquero

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⁶ In my section “Editing Race, Emphasizing Sexuality,” I argue that the differences between the first edition of “María Concepción” and the version in Flowering Judas and Other Stories illustrate how Porter stories reflect US biases toward Mexico during the 1930s.

⁷ Not only did she travel between the US and Mexico several times in the 1920s and 1940s, Porter traveled within the US, notably between Texas and New York and later, she traveled to Europe, never living in one location for very long.

⁸ See longer discussion of Orientalism in Chapter 1.
of the Brush Country. In order to vindicate the Texas Rangers (the predecessors of the US Border Patrol), Dobie “distinguishes between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ Mexicans and makes the symbolic, logical deduction that all the dead Mexicans were ‘bad’” (50). I argue that Porter does the same in “María Concepción.” Porter describes a loyal community that supports María Concepción against police questioning and affirms that the dead María Rosa was “bad”:

María Concepción suddenly felt herself guarded, surrounded, upborne by her faithful friends. They were around her, speaking for her, defending her, the forces of life were ranged invincibly with her against the beaten dead … María Concepción looked from one to the other of the circling, intent faces. Their eyes gave reassurance, understanding, a secret and mighty sympathy … The gendarmes were at a loss. They, too, felt that sheltering wall cast impenetrably around her. (32)

The crowd supports María even though they suspect her guilt and they chastise María Rosa for her behavior: “‘María Rosa had a strange life, apart from us’” (“María 32). María’s violence toward María Rosa is justified because she “had a strange life.” Furthermore, in the passage I quote above, the crowd also supports María’s “uncivilized” behavior – the murder – and prevents the gendarmes from establishing law and order in their town. They willing resist civilization in order to protect María, whom they recognize as one of their own.

But, I argue that María actually symbolizes civilization and modernity; therefore, the town supports a figure that perpetuates their oppression. María managed her own business selling chickens in the community, she controlled her family’s finances, believed in modern medicine, rather than the remedies offered by the town’s medicine woman Lupe, and she was a Christian: “María Concepción had no faith in the charred owl bones, the singed rabbit fur … She was a good Christian, and … bought her remedies bottled, with printed directions … at the drugstore
near the city market” (“María” 4). Through the town’s unquestioning support of María despite her crime, Porter implicitly renders them as María’s (civilization’s) inferior. The townspeople are susceptible and naïve; therefore, even though they reject apparent law and order, they ostensibly accept María’s power in the community. Moreover, as I assert above, readers are supposed to sympathize with María because of Juan’s unfaithfulness and the death of her child. By extension, readers sympathize with a symbol of civilization rather than the “primitive” society.

By making María a symbol of violent civilization (as María Rosa’s murderer), Porter displaces Anglo-American violence and oppression in Mexico.9 As such, “María Concepción’s” narrative resembles other romantic regionalist ethnographic narratives of the 1930s. Stout elucidates how romantic regionalist ethnographers displaced narratives of violence in order to distinguish themselves from a history of oppression. Writing about J. Frank Dobie, Stout claims, “the entire state [Texas] would take on something of the image of the West [in his work] … Dobie orchestrated a shift in the image of Texas through a reconstruction of its history and culture designed, according to James Lee, to ‘promote Texas as a far western state untainted by its Confederate background’” (6). By erasing slavery from Texas history, Dobie freed his cultural antecedents (and himself) from a narrative of subjugation and violence.10 Therefore, his ethnographies, which romanticize Texas history, are complicit with historical processes of exploitation.

Likewise, in “María Concepción” Porter explicates a narrative of primitive subjugation by a figure of modernity, but does not link María’s violence to US intervention in Mexico, thereby obfuscating the US’s exploitation of Indo-Mexicans. Furthermore, by positioning

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9 I discuss the role of the only Anglo-American character in the story in “Editing Race, Emphasizing Sexuality.”
10 Similarly, Stout conceptualizes Porter’s work as a reflection of Texas, Porter’s birth home: “The proximity of Mexico to Texas and the United States plays a major role in her art by providing her at once a congenial refuge and an alternative vision and perspective on her own culture” (5). In other words, Mexico became a space through which Porter understood her experiences in Texas.
Maria’s violent behavior within a larger narrative of violence – the Mexican Revolution – Porter suggests that Maria’s (civilization’s) violence is an appropriate response to the violence always-already present within Mexican culture: “The field of war had unrolled itself, a long scroll of vexations, until the end had frayed out within twenty miles” of the village (“Maria” 15). By keeping Mexico locked in a narrative of violence, Porter denies Mexican modernization and elides her own role as a cultural interlocutor who ultimately reframes Mexican culture through her American (Orientalist) lens and reproduces a US national imaginary that positions the US as the culturally superior nation in relation to Mexico.

The Cultural Production of Objectivity

As I explicate in this project’s introduction, William Spratling and Katherine Anne Porter reaffirm US economic and cultural dominance over Mexico primarily through discussions of race and sexuality that compose similar representations of Mexico and Mexicanness. In this chapter, I frame Porter’s relationship with this US national imaginary through the cultural front’s artistic practices. Most relevant to this chapter is the documentary style she appropriates in her stories. Through an analysis of Porter’s 1934 novella “Hacienda,” this section articulates how Porter uses a documentary aesthetic, or what I refer to as objectivity, to construct Mexico as an “othered” nation that aligns with 1930s US socio-political projects and domestic attitudes toward Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

Porter originally conceived of “Hacienda” as a non-fiction piece following Porter’s final trip to Mexico; the Virginia Quarterly Review published “Hacienda” as a shorter article in 1932 (Unrue, Understanding 38). The narrative opens with three characters leaving Mexico City by train for the enigmatic Don Genaro’s pulque hacienda where they are filming a documentary. The travel companions include the unnamed narrator, a female writer (ostensibly, Porter’s
double), Andreyev, one of three Russian (Communist) filmmakers making the documentary, and the Anglo-American Kennerly, the filmmakers’ business manager.11 Their “film [is] a glorious history of Mexico, her wrongs and sufferings and her final triumph through the latest revolution” (“Hacienda” 242). As Andreyev explains, they film on the hacienda because “it was really an old-fashioned feudal estate with the right kind of architecture, no modern improvements to speak of, and with the purest type of peons” (“Hacienda” 235, emphasis mine). This passage reveals that the filmmakers chose Don Genaro’s hacienda because it comported with audience expectations of Mexico.

And, the passage’s irony is representative of the critiques Porter makes throughout “Hacienda”: Porter highlights her disillusionment with the Mexican Revolution – and the continued disenfranchisement of Indo-Mexican peons – through ironic commentary, shrouding the hacienda in an oppressive atmosphere plagued by the ills of modernization. For example, Porter comments on the pulque industry:

The white flood of pulque [a symbol of pre-Colombian Mexico] flowed without pause; all over Mexico the Indians would drink the corpse-white liquor … and the money would flow silver-white into the government treasury; 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. It was all arranged. (“Hacienda” 280-281)

I believe that Porter implicitly legitimated her own representations of Mexico in “Hacienda” by censuring the filmmaking process and the corruption of pulque production. Porter’s critique in

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11 Stout asserts that “Hacienda’s” narrator is “Porter herself” (47). A host of secondary characters appear in “Hacienda”: Lolita, the film’s lead actress and companion to both Don Genaro and Doña Julia, Stepanov, the film’s camera-man, Uspensky, the film’s director, Betancourt, Uspensky’s Mexican advisor (but French by education), Justino and Vicente, two of the film’s supporting actors, and Carlos Montaña, a popular Mexican songwriter whose career failed ten years before the events of the story.
“Hacienda” correlates with her dissatisfaction with post-revolutionary Mexican cultural production writ large. According to Unrue, Porter was increasingly dissatisfied with the work of Diego Rivera and other Mexican artists during the 1930s: “Like others, she believes that Diego Rivera has become corrupt; she says with high irony, ‘But the Mexican Renascence is in full swing, with Diego getting … twenty-two thousand dollar[s] … from Morrow – the Good Will Ambassador’” (Truth 84). By criticizing artists like Rivera, Porter reproduces a narrative of Mexican cultural inferiority. US interventionists (like Morrow) provided the tools of exploitation ($20,000), but Mexican artists chose to exploit their own culture for American tourists. Porter reiterates her critique of Rivera in “Hacienda”: during a card game with the narrator, an assistant to Betancourt reveals he is “devoted … to fresco painting, ‘only modern,’ he told me, ‘like Rivera’s, the method, but not old-fashioned style like his’” (282). I contend that Porter implicitly distinguished her fiction from the work of other artists (like Rivera) who she suggested reappropriated Mexican culture for personal economic gain.

In so doing, I believe that Porter understood her stories as sympathetic and, therefore, more “authentic” representations of Mexicanness. In the introduction to Gringos in Mexico, Edward Simmen suggests that Porter achieved objectivity through her stories: “[Porter] had the advantage of a foreigner’s perspective: she could stand apart, as does the narrator of ‘Hacienda,’ to observe and reflect and occasionally insert a piercing comment” (xxxvii). However, I contend that Porter is unable to maintain objectivity because of her relationship with “Hacienda’s” subject matter. Stout writes: “Porter’s last significant act before leaving Mexico at the end of the summer was a three-day visit to a pulque plantation where the Russian director Sergei Eisenstein

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12 Porter also critiques Spratling (who was a professional colleague): “Bill Spratling sleeps with his mozo [assistant], and encourages the lacquerware industry” (Unrue, Truth 84). Porter distanced herself from Spratling, whose representations of Mexico were very similar to her own. The reference to his “mozo” alludes to Spratling’s alleged homosexuality and reveals Porter’s noted homophobia.
was filming material for *Que Viva México!*,” which provided the inspiration for “Hacienda” (47). In an analysis Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, scholar Beth Harrison asserts that Hurston’s work illustrates that “[t]o become an ‘insider,’” the author “must surrender ‘objectivity’” (Harrison 91). Extending Harrison’s argument to Porter’s stories, I believe Porter, too, was limited by her closeness to the subject matter; therefore, I complicate the tropes of objectivity I see in “Hacienda.”

Porter actively uses tropes of objectivity in order to distinguish her own documentary processes from those of her Anglo characters. However, the two are inextricably linked: I read Porter’s biases partly through the impressions and observations made by her Anglo characters. Neither Porter nor her Anglo characters are objective narrators of Mexican experience. Porter conceptualizes objectivity in “Hacienda” through the filmmaking process described in the story. The camera represents mechanized objectivity, only capturing what the filmmakers positioned before it: “The camera had seen this unchanged world as a landscape with figures, but figures under a doom imposed by the landscape” (“Hacienda” 236). Furthermore, the Russian filmmakers Andreyev and Uspensky are cultural outsiders without political interests in Mexico.\(^{13}\)

Interrupting the all-seeing eye of the camera and the allegedly sympathetic filmmakers, however, were Mexican government officials who directed the camera and filmmakers (in their new project surrounding post-Revolution Mexico) toward scenes that supported Mexican nationalism:

The government officials still took no chance. They wanted to improve this opportunity to film a glorious history of Mexico … and the Russians found themselves surrounded

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\(^{13}\) Porter discusses a previous film they made – a documentary about the Oaxaca earthquake – and that they adhered to filmmaking policy by submitting the film to the Mexican censorship board (“Hacienda” 232). She also catalogues Russian, American and Mexican (both revolutionary and anti-revolutionary) interests in their project and debunks rumors of the filmmakers’ loyalties: “Wild rumor ran before them. It was said they had been invited … It was said they had not been invited” (“Hacienda” 241).
and insulated from their material by the entire staff of professional propagandists …

Dozens of helpful observers, art experts, photographers, literary talents, and travel guides … show[ed] them all the most beautiful, significant, and characteristic things in the national life and soul: if by chance anything not beautiful got in the way of the camera, there was a very instructed and sharp-eyed committee of censors whose duty it was to see that the scandal went no further than the cutting room. (“Hacienda” 242-243)

Here, objectivity is limited by Mexico itself; the Euro-American visitors are not accountable for any inaccurate representations of Mexico projected by the camera.

Another way Porter conceptualizes objectivity is through first-person point-of-view narration. The unnamed narrator ostensibly has no influence on the story’s events. Despite her outsider’s perspective, the narrator still reveals pertinent details about the other major characters’ past. Her descriptions are thorough and appear reliable. As I mentioned above, however, she leaves the narrative unfinished. Even though the narrator (and the audience) is aware that the film will resume production “tomorrow,” she abandons the project, stating, “I could not wait for tomorrow in this deathly air” (“Hacienda” 284-285). While Denning contends that the documentary aesthetic was often “a sign of the failures of narrative imagination … [and] the inability to imagine a completed narrative,” in the context of “Hacienda,” I believe Porter’s incomplete narrative is an example of selective forgetting and ultimately supports a US national imaginary rather than criticize it (119). According to Guidotti-Hernández, “the power to narrate or to choose not to narrate is in itself an extreme act of control, a way to maintain a selective symbolic order” (177). Indeed, the narrator of “Hacienda” leaves the Mexican characters in a

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14 Here, the phrase “deathly air” assumes two meanings. Not only does it refer to the oppressive stench from the pulque vat-room that the narrator abhors; I believe it also refers to the murder of the “the girl” by her brother Justino. The hacienda provides a setting for murder, chaos and uncleanness, suggesting the same link between space and primitiveness that I see in Spratling’s work.
state of chaos: “In the morning there began a gradual drift back to town, by train, by automobile” (“Hacienda” 284). The narrator and the filmmakers escape to a better world via the tools of modernity and Porter neither resolves the hacienda’s narrative nor does she allow the Mexican characters to continue their own narrative.

I contend, then, that “Hacienda’s” narrator (and, by extension Porter) is quietly implicated in the fabric of Mexican experience. As the only Anglo character who speaks Spanish, the narrator literally has to translate Mexican experience to the filmmakers (and the American reading audience). The narrator recognizes the difficulty of this task: “The boy’s words were in a jargon hard for me to understand, but I snatched key words and translated quickly as I could” (“Hacienda” 245). As such, I read Porter’s stories through this translation process. Porter implicitly cannot grasp the meanings of Mexican life or identity, but she still chooses key aspects to emphasize or efface in order to make sense of Mexican experience and package it for American audiences.15 In this way, neither Porter nor her narrator “stand apart” from the stories they tell, complicating “Hacienda’s” documentary aesthetic. While Porter critiques the filmmakers for choosing the hacienda because it comports with audience expectations of “real” Mexico (see discussion above), I believe that Porter, too, represents a version of Mexico that mirrors pervading images of Mexico and ultimately supports a narrative of US cultural superiority.

One final aspect of “Hacienda’s” structure warrants attention in terms of objectivity. Throughout “Hacienda,” temporal interruptions jostle the linear narrative. Wrought with diegetic

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15 Givens, Juan’s chief in “María Concepción,” demonstrates this repackaging process, too. He is instrumental in creating the Mexico preserved in memory. Not only is he an archaeologist uncovering a lost Mexican history, he is reminding readers of the indigenous peoples’ primitiveness. Givens ascribes artifacts with his own meanings and decides which pieces are promoted outside this village. María, meanwhile, find Givens’s practices unusual as she observes him “waving a shattered pot or a human skull above his head, shouting for his photographer to come and make a picture of this!” (“María” 9). Although María criticizes Givens in this passage, I believe that overall, Porter makes Givens a benevolent presence in Mexico. I discuss this in my next section, “Editing Race, Emphasizing Sexuality.”
time gaps and flashbacks, it becomes difficult to follow the plot’s narrative logic that unsurprisingly corresponds with disruptions in the filmmaking process. “Hacienda’s” jostled narrative and its multiple character studies evidence Porter’s intimacy with her subject. And, these slippages reaffirm Hurston’s warning that objectivity is impossible for those who are close to their subject matter. Guidotti-Hernández cogently summarizes why these gaps are important: “In ethnography, much as in literary text, ‘some data are chosen, others omitted.’” (139). The effect of this selective re-presentation, as Guidotti-Hernández observed it in Jovita González’s work, is that the eliminated information becomes a tool to “mask narratives of violence and subjection” (Guidotti-Hernández 139).

By similarly framing “Hacienda,” Porter disassociated herself from the violence of post-Revolution Mexico and her own contribution to the violence. Her stories show violence inherited from Mexico’s past, but elides American exploitation in the current moment. For example, in her account of the pulque industry I detailed above, Porter highlights a cycle of capitalistic corruption and Indo-Mexican oppression that has ostensibly endured since the Spanish conquest. Porter limits her socio-economic critiques to an exploitative Mexican political system, despite asserting in a 1921 report from Mexico City that “[t]he Mexican capitalist joins forces with the American against his revolutionary fellow countryman” (“Mexican Trinity” 58).

She obfuscates this narrative in “Hacienda”; instead, Euro-American intervention is limited to the cultural sphere (and, again, only at the behest of the Mexican government). For example, the way Don Genaro’s wife Doña Julia appropriates many “Hollywood” fashions demonstrates the (apparently negative) American cultural influence in Mexico: she was a “figure from a Hollywood comedy, in black satin pajamas adorned with rainbow-colored bands of silk, loose sleeves falling over her babyish hands with pointed scarlet finger ends” (256). However,
Porter effaces Hollywood’s economic influence. The money for the film was raised by Kennerly’s “brother-in-law” and his “friends” rather than “Hollywood”: “His brother-in-law had raised most of the money among his friends for this expedition” (“Hacienda” 233). And, the limited US investment was intended for the film’s production, rather than for economic and political exploitation. Through these representations, Porter created an implied hierarchy between the US and Mexico in terms of economic power and political stability and reasserted her narrative voice.

To do this, Porter denies poor, indigenous peoples’ autonomy. Instead, she favors observations by the narrator who communicates her (the narrator’s) impressions of Mexican experience – which are further mediated by the camera images shown to her by Andreyev: Looking at stills from the film, the narrator articulates, “The closed dark faces were 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” (“Hacienda” 236). Porter establishes difference between her Anglo and Mexican characters through descriptions of Indo-Mexican primitiveness. And with the proliferation of this image of Mexicanness through media, Porter’s “Hacienda” (again, mirroring the action of the plot) implicitly supports Mexico’s role as the “other” in the US national imaginary. In this chapter’s next section, I provide a more in-depth analysis of the ways Porter renders Mexicanness in her work with a focus on how race and sexuality connote Mexican primitiveness.

Editing Race, Emphasizing Sexuality

Necessary to Katherine Anne Porter’s narrative development are her depictions of a Mexican race, a race in which brown skin is not the only mark of difference. While most of Porter’s Mexican characters are described as dark, other attributes determine Mexican inferiority
in comparison to their Anglo counterparts, and, by extension, Anglo readers. I explore two ways in which racial difference is established in the three narratives analyzed, both of which contribute images of Mexicans that justify continued subordination in and by the US. First, I contend that Mexican characters are denied maturity; characters are infantilized through their actions and by the descriptions offered by Anglo characters and Porter. Second, and perhaps more importantly, I recognize the comparisons made between Mexican characters and animals. While Unruh has elucidated Porter’s “identification of children with animals,” I extend this idea to comment on a Mexican racial composition (Truth 50). Dehumanizing these characters, Porter assures readers that all Mexicans, even those in the ruling class, are inferior to Anglos; therefore, Mexico and its people (including diaspora populations within the US) do not pose a threat to Anglo superiority and dominance.

I use “María Concepción” to demonstrate these themes. María Concepción is a successful business woman and married to the unreliable Juan Villega (with whom she is expecting a child), employee of the Anglo-American archaeologist Givens, when the narrative opens. Walking to the market where she sells fowls, she passes the house of medicine woman, Lupe, and the teenaged María Rosa, and witnesses María Rosa and Juan romantically engaged. Juan and María Rosa continue their affair, leave together for war and dishonorably return, María Rosa in labor and Juan arrested for abandoning his post. María Rosa delivers their child; Juan, however, returns to the house he shares with María Concepción, trying to regain the power he feels he has lost to her. María, however, realizes that only one thing will restore peace to their broken family and murders María Rosa with her butcher knife. As the story concludes, María Concepción avoids arrest as the townspeople support her, creating an alibi for her whereabouts and reaffirming her positive character traits. María and Juan take the newborn child as their own and
she feels satisfied with the return to her status quo.

By refusing brown characters independence and maturation, Porter frames Mexicans as children in need of Anglo intervention and generosity.16 Throughout the story, Porter frames Juan as Givens’s son: María states that because Givens is “Juan’s chief,” he is “to be respected, to be placated” (“María” 10). The characters’ use of the paternal term “chief” signifies their deference to Givens. Furthermore, Givens “liked his Indians best when he could feel a fatherly indulgence for their primitive childish ways,” indicating that both Mexicans and Anglo-Americans knew their assigned role in the intercultural relationship (“María” 11).17 Porter emphasizes Givens’s benevolent form of patriarchy as an alternative model of Anglo intervention in Mexico. Unlike the intervention by US capitalists, he is sympathetic and generous toward the Mexican people. He constantly protects Juan from incarceration, even when he does not support Juan’s behavior, reinforcing his role as Juan’s parent figure. Bailing Juan from prison after he deserts the army, Givens offers Juan advice for reconciling with María Concepción: “‘For God’s sake stop playing the fool,’ said Givens irritably. ‘Some day I’m going to be five minutes too late …. Let me tell you, Juan, things haven’t been going as well as you think. You be careful. Some day María Concepción will just take your head off with that carving knife of hers. You keep that in mind’” (“María” 17, 18). Despite having been married, fathering two children and fighting in the Revolution, he needs Givens’s guidance and supervision in order to succeed and survive the events of the story. Stripping Mexicans of their independence and

16 This infantilizing is mirrored in Porter’s “Hacienda.” The filmmakers train journey is interrupted by news that one of the film’s actors (Justino) had murdered his sister. The unnamed informant—the film’s lead (and a professional boxer)– is only referred to as “the Indian boy.” While his biological age is never mentioned, his career (and former career as a toreador) suggests has significant life experience. Furthermore, components of his bodily comportment indicate his maturity: “Fame added to fame had given this boy a brilliant air of self-confidence and he approached us, brows drawn together, with the easy self-possession of a man of the world accustomed to boarding trains and meeting his friends” (“Hacienda” 144).
17 María Concepción describes Givens as “that diverting white man who had no woman of his own … A mysterious man, undoubtedly rich, and Juan’s chief, therefore to be respected, to be placated” (“María” 10).
maturity unveils a significant component of the penned racial imaginary in Porter’s works. Her stories show a naturalized connection between race and autonomy that reaffirms Anglo superiority.

In addition to linking race with autonomy, Porter delimits her brown characters’ humanity through literary devices; she deploys metaphors to compare Mexicans with animals. As María witnessed Juan’s infidelity, he “flourished his wide hat back and forth, walking proudly as a game-cock” (8).18 Here, Juan is excessively virile, but he also lacks a conscience. He is bred to fight – it is a quality inherent within him. Later, when María Rosa and Juan leave together for the war, Porter again relies on this type of description; according to the narrator, María Rosa united with “experienced women of war, which went over the crops like locusts … Sometimes they would encounter the women from the other army, and a second battle as grim as the first would take place” (“María” 12). María Rosa loses her individual subjectivity with this comparison to the predatory insect; she joins her brethren and collectively, the nameless horde ravages Mexico’s harvest. Both of these passages racialize the characters by essentially transforming them from cognizant, thinking individuals into instinctual, impulsive creatures.

The processes of racialization explicated above enforce the primitiveness of Mexico, especially in comparison to Anglo-Americans. Porter uses infantilization and animalization to emphasize differences between the US and Mexico. Within the works I analyze here, Porter casts Anglo characters as rational counterparts (i.e., Givens) to the Mexicans, providing stability to her narratives. In Truth and Vision, Unrue observes a causal link between primitiveness and other inferior traits: “In both ‘María Concepción’ and ‘Hacienda’ Porter has presented the primitive that contains forces beyond conscious understanding. Other reasonless areas of the darkness

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18 The version of “María Concepción” published in Century did not use this metaphor, instead Juan is described as “walking very proudly” (“María,” Century 226).
include lust, cruelty, bloodlust, and hate” which connote savagery (Unrue, *Truth* 30). One of these traits – lust – warrants closer inspection below.

As I stated in this chapter’s introduction, María is a symbol of civilization; both she and Givens represent how whiteness correlates with civilization in “María Concepción.” Not only does Porter describe María as financially independent, stating, “It was commonly known that if she wished to buy a new rebozo for herself or a shirt for Juan, she could bring out a sack of hard silver coins for the purpose,” Porter links María’s power to her skin color (5). After María witnesses Juan and María Rosa together, Porter alludes to her skin color. In an exchange between María and Givens, Porter writes, “He noticed her unnatural paleness. ‘The sun is too hot eh?’ he asked” (“María” 11). Two readings of this exchange are possible: First, I read María’s pale skin color as her physical reaction to Juan and María Rosa’s affair. Second, and more importantly, I believe that María’s change in skin color indicates the emergent physical manifestation of her power. After the affair, María, now “pale” (read: white), more strongly signifies civilization: “She worked harder than ever, and her butchering knife was scarcely ever out of her hand” (“María” 15). The knife is a phallic symbol of power and an extension of María. Through her knife – a sharp, metallic appendage – María wields masculine (civilized) power over her townspeople and eventually uses it to murder María Rosa who embodies primitiveness (see discussion below). Ultimately, María, like Givens, becomes a paternal figure as Juan once again assumes the role of child: After María kills María Rosa, Juan “wished to repent openly, not as a man, but as a very small child” (“María” 25). María represents civilization because of her financial independence, whiteness, and paternal, masculine power.

By racializing her characters as such, Porter evokes associations between Mexican primitiveness and US racial superiority widely circulated in the US during this time. According

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19 In other words, Givens, who Porter establishes as “white,” hails María as “white,” too.
to historian Matthew Frye Jacobson, author of *Barbarian Virtues*, the link between dark skin and primitiveness “recommend[ed] either extinction, removal, or reformation under the stewardship of the West” (107). For example, Porter reproduces this script when María takes María Rosa’s child for her own: “‘He is mine,’ she [María] said clearly, ‘I will take him with me.’” No one assented in words, but an approving nod, a bare breath of complete agreement, stirred among them as they made way for her” (“María” 33). By raising the child as her own, María symbolically raises the child – her son, nonetheless – under the control of civilization. Porter represents Mexicans as primitive children, implicitly linking her work with a US national imaginary that framed Mexico as the US’s subordinate neighbor to the South.

In order to examine how Porter represented Mexicanness more thoroughly, I illustrate how the intersection between sexuality and racialized identities further establish Anglo superiority in Porter’s stories. Mexico, in the imaginary of these stories, cultivates possibilities for sexual deviance, making it subordinate to the United States. Sexual transgression pervades all of these scenes, indicating that Porter inextricably links race and sexuality in her representations of Mexicanness. For example, as María Concepción notices Juan walking like a “game-cock,” she is also alerted to his affair with María Rosa for the first time. But, the community does not punish Juan for his sexual prowess; instead, María Rosa – aged fifteen – is found culpable for their transgressive sexual behavior. By the end of the narrative, María murders María Rosa as payment for her misdeeds. Porter’s treatment of María Rosa indicates that transgressive female sexuality marks Mexicans as inferior and implicitly justifies their “extinction”: According to María Concepción, “‘Yes, she [María Rosa] is a whore! She has no right to live’” (9).  

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20 Porter similarly treats sexuality in “Hacienda”: Don Genaro is married to a young woman, Doña Julia. Readers are informed of a convoluted affair involving both Genaro and his wife and the young actress Lolita. Porter describes the consequences of sexual relationships outside the marriage. First, readers learn of an affair between Don Genaro and Lolita that made Doña Julia “fearfully jealous” (“Hacienda” 238). In retaliation, Julia “began making Don
Maria Rosa is not only punished for her transgressive sexuality by death, but by the process of disremembering, too. Porter describes this process: “María Rosa had vanished, to come no more forever … Tomorrow he [Juan] would go back to dull and endless labor, he must descend into the trenches of the buried city as María Rosa must go into her grave” (33, emphasis mine). By using the phrase “must go into her grave,” Porter suggests that it is imperative that María Rosa and the memory of her are permanently buried. Furthermore, I argue that María Rosa’s death signifies how Porter uses selective forgetting to warn women in the US against promiscuity. According to Guidotti-Hernández, “The desire to forget bodies of tortured, murdered, and maligned women … is ‘a cruel and self-centered process’… in order to preserve a sense of normalcy” that reifies national imaginaries (162). In “María Concepción,” Porter only briefly mentions the violence María Concepción enacted upon María Rosa. Lupe, the medicine woman who found María Rosa describes her body: “‘María Rosa … was lying all tangled up, and from her neck to her middle she was full of knife-holes … Her eyes were –’” (29). Interrupting Lupe with the comment “‘Never mind,’” the gendarmes quickly end the discussion of violence. Instead, Porter reminds readers of María Rosa’s faults: Several townspeople assert, “‘She [María Concepción] is a woman of good reputation among us, and María Rosa was not” (31). Through these comments, the townspeople do not only confirm María Concepción’s good character, they implicitly rationalize María Rosa’s murder. Guidotti-Hernández asserts, “[these] act[s] of attempted erasure[,] link(s) to a tradition in the regional and national imaginaries in which the subjugated bodies of women of color present object lessons that must be retold at the most inopportune moments to discipline other women, even when the majority of the community

Genaro jealous with other men” (238). Complicating this narrative further is an implied relationship between Doña Julia and Lolita (“Hacienda” 239). Unlike Juan, however, Genaro is embarrassed by this love triangle. Genaro’s humiliation stems not from his affair, but from his marriage to Doña Julia in the first place. By marrying Julia who “would have had at best a career in the theater,” Genaro rejects his social position and modernity (“Hacienda” 254). He represents Mexico’s failure to modernize because of his intimate relationships with primitive women.
is making a concerted effort to forget them” (162). As such, I believe that Porter uses the figure of María Rosa to warn women in the US that if they are sexually deviant, they, too, will be forgotten from the US national imaginary.

“María Concepción” first appeared in *The Century* magazine in 1922. There are several differences between the short story in *Century* and the final version published in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* that affect my interpretation of the story. The most striking contrast between the two versions of “María Concepción” is the lack of animalization in the original. Both instances of animalization I described above – Juan’s “cock-fighting” and María Rosa’s “locusts” – were added to the version of the story in *Flowering Judas and Other Stories*. While these instances of racialization are minor changes to the structure of the story, they demonstrate the larger changing structure of the US’s relationship with Mexico. I contend that this also reflects how racialization was popularized between 1922 and 1935. Primitiveness became a stronger element through which African Americans (and, later, Mexicans) were othered in the national consciousness.

Several socio-economic developments suggest that similar tenets drove the US national imaginary in both 1922 and 1935 (when *Flowering Judas* was published). After a few years of economic growth following WWI, the US experienced a brief recession in the early 1920s, foreshadowing the Great Depression ten years later. Mass deportation of Mexicans and Mexican Americans accompanied both of these periods, indicating a correlation between economic recessions and anti-Mexican sentiments in the US. As such, both periods were defined by policies that disenfranchised Americans of non-European descent. Therefore, I contend the more

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21 According to Daniel Kanstroom, about “100,000 Mexicans” repatriated to Mexico from 1920 to 1921 following “anti-Mexican campaigns” by native-born white Americans (156-157). Likewise, during the Great Depression, approximately “20 percent” of the Mexican population in the US – about “1.4 million” – was repatriated (Ngai 75). The increased number in the latter time period corresponds with the severity of the economic collapse.
explicit racist utterances in the later version of “María Concepción” correspond with the severity of the economic collapse that triggered the Great Depression. Additionally, by considering Porter’s relationship with the cultural front, I believe that her more sympathetic portrayal of Juan (as a revolutionary soldier) in the earlier edition of the story represents her support of the Mexican Revolution. With the evident failing of the Revolution by 1935, Porter’s stories demonstrate a more cynical portrayal of the Mexican Revolution and its actors. In the next section of this chapter, I describe how Porter treats the Mexican Revolution and illustrate the implications of this treatment.

Violent Landscapes

Porter’s homogenous vision of Mexico’s population is not the only way she creates a national imaginary in her stories. Porter also relies on a coherent representation of the Mexican landscape that reifies Mexico as the US’s inferior southern neighbor. Two locations are privileged within her narratives: Mexico City and its impoverished surroundings. Unlike Spratling, who argued that Taxco represented “real” Mexico, far from the capital, Porter emphasizes how the city condenses and amplifies the consequences of the Mexican Revolution on Mexican experience. Mexico City assumes a leading role in “Flowering Judas”; Porter maps the city through unknown streets and prison cells and shrouds it in all-consuming darkness.22

Published in 1929, “Flowering Judas” details scenes from the life of the young Anglo-American Laura who lives in Mexico City and aids the Revolution by visiting prisoners and teaching school. She interacts with the suspicious Braggioni, a failed revolutionary leader to whom Laura “owes her comfortable situation and her salary,” and who sings nightly on Laura’s patio (“Flowering” 140). Braggioni is a symbol of Laura’s lost idealism, but Laura persists in the

22 Unknown to the protagonist Laura, that is: “She knocks on unfamiliar doors … even if a known face emerges from the sour gloom of that unknown interior, still it is the face of a stranger” (“Flowering” 151).
revolutionary cause, attending union meetings and facilitating illicit fundraising activities. After the suicide of the imprisoned revolutionary Eugenio, the story grows dark and Laura ruminates in an atmosphere of fear, burdened by guilt – Eugenio did overdose on drugs she supplied, after all. Stout argues that narratives like “Flowering Judas” demonstrated Porter’s “respect for the greatness of some of its [Mexico’s] leaders and artists alongside her dismay at what she saw as a prevailing veniality and foolishness, and always the tense coexistence of beauty with violence” (50). Laura embodies these contradictions as Porter illustrates the Mexican Revolution through her eyes.23

The capital is dangerous; Porter transports readers to the Mexican Revolution even though it ostensibly ended in 1921. The city provides refuge for revolutionaries and their enemies “hiding from firing squads in back streets in mildewed houses, where they sit in tumbled beds and talk bitterly” (“Flowering” 146). Porter’s Mexican landscape, destroyed by the violence of the Mexican Revolution, is one process of selective forgetting in her narratives. By rendering Mexico solely through images of the corrupt city still reeling from the effects of the Revolution, Porter reaffirms the differences between the US and Mexico while effacing Mexico’s alternative landscapes and experiences. Porter traps Mexico in its violent past and fails to represent Mexico’s effort to stabilize in the decade following the Revolution: Laura “is waiting for tomorrow with a bitter anxiety as if tomorrow may not come, but time may be caught immovably in this hour, with herself transfixed, Braggioni singing on forever, and Eugenio’s body not yet discovered by the guard” (“Flowering” 155). Again, I believe that Eugenio is a symbol for the

23 Laura’s role in “Flowering Judas” corresponds with that of the female narrator in “Hacienda.” Both narrators function as Porter’s double: they articulate an apparently unbiased image of Mexico, obfuscating their own cultural intervention in Mexican society. While Laura feels remorse for her role in Eugenio’s death (read as a cultural intervention); she does not publicly reveal her misdeeds. She continues intervening in the Mexican Revolution while maintaining her innocent veneer. Perhaps Porter critiques the hypocrisy of US intervention during this time through Laura, but Porter still denies that she, as author, intervenes through the representations of Mexico in her stories.
Revolution. If the guards assume he is still alive, the Revolution remains alive, too.

Narrating the Mexican Revolution through Laura’s movements through Mexico City, “Flowering Judas” intricately links the violence of the Revolution with the dark and dangerous capital. Both private and public spaces threaten Laura, trapping her in a violent atmosphere that she cannot escape: “Laura has begun to find reasons for avoiding her own house until the latest possible moment” indicating that she preferred the unpredictability of Mexico City’s streets over the ostensible safety of her home (“Flowering” 139). Read through Porter’s affiliation with the cultural front, this passage represents Porter’s sympathy for the Mexican Revolution and critique of US foreign policy. In other words, I read this as Porter’s declaration that she was more at home in Mexico than in the US at the time. Despite Porter’s sympathies, I do not believe that this is the narrative’s only interpretation.

By analyzing “Flowering Judas” in conjunction with Guidotti-Hernández’s understanding of national imaginaries, I believe that the Mexican Revolution functions as a device of selective forgetting. According to Guidotti-Hernández, events like the Mexican Revolution act as focus points for national imaginaries. Concentrating on violent, yet discrete events allows the US to elide long periods of violence against subjugated peoples (Guidotti-Hernández 23). And, narratives of dead heroes teach citizens the lessons learned through these events. In “Flowering Judas,” Braggioni functions in this role: he reflects an always-already failed Revolution, foreshadowing what could befall Laura if she continues to follow the same path. Braggioni simultaneously repulses and fascinates Laura, forcing her to recognize their shared fate: “‘You [Laura], poor thing, you will be disappointed, too. You are born for it. We are more alike than you realize in some things. Wait and see. Some day you will remember what I have told you, you will know that Braggioni was your friend’” (“Flowering” 144). By reading Braggioni as this
According to Guidotti-Hernández, “The most contested categories of regional and national identity and nationalism in González’s work are based in representations of speaking subjects who are actually or symbolically dead” (139). As an aberrant subject, Braggioni fits the latter category – symbolically dead – because he cannot modernize. He is trapped in the annals of Mexican history (the Mexican Revolution) instead of existing in the present: “Not for nothing has Braggioni taken pains to be a good revolutionist and a professional lover of humanity. He will never die of it. He has the malice, the cleverness, the wickedness, the sharpness of wit, the hardness of heart…*He will never die of it*” (“Flowering” 152, emphasis in original). In the context of Porter’s bibliography, Braggioni represents Mexico’s failure to modernize.

Just as Porter expresses Laura’s affinity for Mexico through her movements through Mexico City, she links Mexican pre-modernity to the city’s secretive nature. Instead of functioning as Mexico’s bustling capital, the city is abandoned except by those involved in the Revolution. The buildings are more threatening than the revolutionaries who remained locked in their prison cells: Laura “longs to fly … into the street where the houses lean together like conspirators under a single mottled lamp” (“Flowering” 142). Porter reconstitutes the city as an inhospitable environment by personifying the houses as such. According to Jacobson, these landscapes were not unique to Porter’s stories. In many US travel narratives of the early 20th century, “entire continents were defined by their presumed emptiness, cultures by their lacks and absences, and peoples by their exemption from the flow of history” (Jacobson 111). Jacobson argues that these representations of barren landscapes justified American intervention in those

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24 In “Hacienda,” the once famous musician, Carlos Montaña also appears as the symbolically dead, reflecting the failure of a larger society. The narrator contends, “I, like Carlos, had changed for the worse”; however, Betancourt, one of Uspensky’s Mexican advisors for the film, “resisted the notion of change in himself [again, for the worse]” (“Hacienda” 261). Porter suggests that modernization and progress are unwelcome – these developments only bring regret and destitution.
spaces. Likewise, Porter’s narratives justify her own cultural intervention. The Anglo characters in her stories guide Mexico towards modernization; however, their guidance reproduces American customs and fosters dependence on American generosity. Regardless of Porter’s sympathy for the exploited classes in Mexico, her stories reproduce narratives of US domination and control that persisted throughout the 20th century. In short, the implicit connections between violence, the landscape, and the Mexican Revolution that coalesce in “Flowering Judas” reaffirm the US national imaginary of the 1930s that depended upon a narrative of US cultural superiority.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to elucidate the cultural environment and movements that resonate with Katherine Anne Porter’s fiction. I specifically analyzed three stories from her 1935 anthology *Flowering Judas and Other Stories* to show how her work reified the US national imaginary despite evidencing a stylistic kinship with the cultural front. The most important aesthetic property that links her stories to the cultural front is an overarching framework of objectivity that pervades all of her work. After establishing how Porter used objectivity to appear unbiased, I illustrated how race, sexuality and the Mexican Revolution function within her stories. Each of these themes that run across her stories provide a gap through which I complicate Porter’s association with the cultural front. Although Porter sympathized with the impoverished and disenfranchised classes in both Mexico and the US, her stories still reaffirmed the US national imaginary of the 1930s. Mexico and Mexicanness remained the “other”: by implicitly racializing Mexicans as inferior and keeping Mexico locked in a violent past, Porter maintained a cultural hierarchy between Mexico and the US.

I believe that this cultural hierarchy necessitated where Porter and Spratling set their
narratives. In the next and final section of this project, I explore the effaced border in the both of these authors’ works. I offer a few reasons why I believe the border is absent in their texts and analyze how this absence contributes to the binary divide I recognize. By denying the shared US-Mexico border, the stories promote an image of the US as a sovereign and limited nation-state.
CONCLUSION

In this project, I have attempted to illustrate how William Spratling and Katherine Anne Porter support the US national imaginary of the 1930s. By exploring the unique ways in which their stories reflect and respond to contemporary US socio-economic nation-building policies, I demonstrate how they rationalized a narrative of US cultural superiority that relied on comparisons with Mexico, thereby positing Mexico as the “other” in the US national imaginary. I chose Spratling and Porter’s works because they both claimed intimacy with Mexico and implicitly suggested throughout their careers that their stories were sympathetic portrayals of “real” Mexico. Moreover, scholars of their work (i.e., Spratling’s biographer Littleton and Porter’s biographer Stout) support this dominant reading of Spratling and Porter’s stories. However, by reading these stories in conjunction with US nation-building projects such as the Good Neighbor Policy and the cultural front, I counter these interpretations. In order to bring my project to a close, I look at a final element that resonates across the texts: the effaced US-Mexican border.

Effacing the Border

As the symbolic divide between two imagined nations (following Anderson’s definitions I explicate at the beginning of this project), the border is a space of violence where two national identities clash, each influencing the other through processes of power and destabilization. As such, I suggest that by relocating their stories to interior Mexico, Spratling and Porter further reify the US and Mexico as sovereign, limited territories that are defined in comparison to the other. By reproducing an image of an “authentic” Mexico that does not share economic or cultural resources with the US nor lays claim to the same citizen-subjects as the US, Spratling and Porter affirm that the US and Mexico are binary opposites. Furthermore, their narratives
affirm that when the two nation-states interact, the US always assumes a dominant position; the US government and its agents can transgress Mexico’s limits while the US remains impenetrable. I read the effaced border in the works of Spratling and Porter through two lenses in order to understand the implications of its absence. First, I situate the effaced border in a larger discussion of the texts’ literary style, extending my analysis of Spratling and Porter’s works through their similarities to contemporary ethnography. Second, I explore how immigration and deportation trends during the 1930s highlighted the importance of the border in the US national imaginary.

_Literary Negation_

Throughout this project, I have explored the connections between Spratling and Porter’s stories and popular literary styles of the 1930s. I focus on the stories’ connection to “romantic regionalist folklore ethnography” in this section to illustrate how the effaced border supports the US national imaginary. I believe that the authors subjected the border to a process of selective forgetting for two reasons that conceptually resemble their ethnographic counterparts – specifically, J. Frank Dobie and Jovita González. First, the border is a “space of death”; therefore, any discussion of the border would warrant depictions of violence. Citing Sharon Holland, Guidotti-Hernández conceptualizes the border as a “space of death” to refer to the violent erasure of subjects (through actual/symbolic death) on the border, creating “a specifically U.S.-Mexican border experience for people of color” (Guidotti-Hernández 140). Unsurprisingly, the competing national imaginaries of Mexico and the US make the border fatal to citizen-subjects. Furthermore, the subjects who are most vulnerable within the “space of death” are those who do not fit either country’s nation-building efforts (i.e., Indians). For Spratling and Porter, whose works romanticize Indo-Mexicans, narratives that illustrate how indigenous peoples are
disenfranchised in both the US and Mexico fundamentally conflict with their literary objectives. Spratling and Porter situate Indo-Mexicans as Mexico’s “true” citizens – primitive, pre-Colombian civilizations who embody Mexico’s pre-modernity and innocence. As I have illustrated throughout this project, Spratling and Porter’s descriptions of pre-Colombian Indians reproduced common stereotypes of Mexicans (and racialize Mexicans as animalized, infantilized individuals dependent upon US generosity); however Spratling and Porter still promoted their work as sympathetic representations of Mexico and Mexicanness. Therefore, narratives of other realities and experiences in Mexico and of Mexicanness would undermine their ability to market their stories as narratives of “real” Mexico.

The coexistence of the authors’ leftist sympathies and conservative undertones in their narratives forms the main linkage between Spratling and Porter’s stories and those of contemporary ethnographers. As I have discussed, Spratling and Porter actively disassociated themselves from the processes of subordination they detail in their stories. For example, in “Hacienda,” Porter distinguishes the female, Anglo-American narrator from the ethnocentric Kennerly. Likewise, in “Lola,” Spratling posits himself against “the lady writer” who exhibits unflattering Euro-American biases toward Mexicans. Therefore, I contend that they refused identification with border violence because it would have implicated them in the struggle and hardships of the people with whom they ostensibly romanticize and sympathize. José Limón’s analysis of J. Frank Dobie’s ethnographies helps explain why Spratling and Porter efface interrogations into border culture. Limón conceptualizes Dobie’s relocation to Mexico’s interior as an “unconscious comedic attempt to reconcile and overcome the social alienation in southern Texas through an ethnographic rendering of innocence that momentarily, and only textually, erases this conflict [Anglo-Texan responsibility for Mexican-Texan social misfortune]” (58).
Limón continues, asserting, “the ideological effect of this erasure is an absolution from complicity and guilt and a continuing ratification of social domination” (58).

This process also holds true in my reading of Spratling and Porter. For example, as I explained in Chapter 1, Spratling intervened in Mexico’s economy by expanding Taxco’s silver industry; however, in Little Mexico, Spratling critiques capitalism and romanticizes pre-Colombian civilizations. In so doing, he denies his own intervention and reframes himself as a benevolent paternal figure. Rationalizing his presence through this lens, Spratling implicitly reproduced the rhetoric of the Good Neighbor Policy. Despite the sympathetic narratives of both the Good Neighbor Policy and Spratling’s silver enterprise, these initiatives propagated a belief in US cultural superiority. I contend that Spratling’s narrative succeeded because Little Mexico is a representation of interior, rural Mexico, far removed from the racial conflict at the border. Spratling convincingly rendered “real” Mexico as homogeneously indigenous while obfuscating the violence incurred on racial subjects on the border. Absolving Anglos from the violence helped Dobie, Spratling, and Porter preserve their own innocence in a system of violent exploitation of Mexicans at the hands of Anglo-Americans. Furthermore, their stories’ relocation to the interior helped maintain the imagined racial hierarchy between the two nations that was integral to the US national imaginary of the 1930s.

I contend that Spratling and Porter actively avoided representations of the border because the border locates both the US imaginary and the Mexican imaginary within the same physical and ideological territory, emphasizing their similarities. Reifying the image of a dominant US is the absolute understanding that – as Simmen addresses in Gringos in Mexico’s introduction – the two cultures are discrete entities. This is a process of selective forgetting: by effacing the similarities between the US and Mexico, Spratling and Porter perpetuated narratives of two
distinct national identities. Quoting former US Ambassador to Mexico, John Gavin, Simmen
affirms the dissimilarities between the US and Mexico:

‘The two-thousand-mile border we share with Mexico is a constant reminder of both our
long-standing good relations and our vulnerability to each other’s problems … It is
imperative, therefore, that we learn to respect our differences if we are to live together
and continue to strengthen this relation. Our two countries represent distinct cultures,
languages, traditions, and historical experiences. The first step toward mutual respect
requires that we perceive these differences clearly and realistically.’ (Simmen xiii-xiv)

The border represents an ambiguous, blended culture that is neither purely American nor
Mexican. In order to maintain the bifurcated hierarchy that Spratling and Porter suggest in their
stories, the nations must remain distinct and separate. The authors allude to this central element
of the US national imaginary throughout their works. Both authors clearly delineate between
who is indigenous and who is white. And, as I indicated in my reading of Spratling’s vignette
“Santa Señora,” Mexican identity connotes inferiority regardless of skin color. Spratling
conflates all Mexicans as indigenous.

Furthermore, Spratling’s ridicule of Señorita Otilia, Doña María’s niece in “Virgen de la
Luz,” illustrates his fear of US-Mexican cultural miscegenation. He calls this process “ugly” and
implies that those who assume a cultural identity other than that of their birth undermine natural
racial categories: “Neither extreme is bad, but the middle stage is one of presumption and a bad
mixture of native with bourgeois taste” (Spratling 139, 140). His ridicule masks a fear of
individuals who successfully pass into social classes above their own. Specifically, Spratling’s
fear centers on racialized subjects who assume elements of white culture, abandoning their
impoverished and inferior culture in the process. This resembles the fear incited by Mexicans in Texas, dispossessed by the imaginaries of both the US and Mexico.

By thinking about Spratling’s fear in conjunction with Guidotti-Hernández’s concept of the “space of death,” I understand the border as a liminal space that condenses and exaggerates the fears of both countries in a specific geographic location. As Guidotti-Hernández writes in regards to Jovita González, “the border constitutes a terrain for a complex set of narratives about subject formation” (140). What is feared, then, is that the dominant culture is contested at all times, always in flux and never stable. In short, the instability of identity at the border makes it dangerous in projects of nation-building. Neither Spratling nor Porter challenge representations of the border as a violent “space of death”; therefore, they both perpetuate the dominant understanding of the border as the battleground for the US national imaginary.

*Immigration and Deportation*

In order to understand why the border was a contentious space during the 1930s, I now turn my attention to contemporary immigration and deportation trends. The increased movement of peoples across the border during these years indicates that the border was central to depression-era US nation-building projects despite its conspicuous absence from the literature I analyze. The Mexican immigrant became a visible specter in the US national imaginary after the 1917 Immigration Act and the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act linked Mexicanness with criminality. ¹ Prior to these acts and even following their enactment, Mexicans immigrated to the US in ever-increasing numbers. In *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, Francisco

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¹ According to Daniel Kanstroom, the 1917 Immigration Act justified deportation by linking it with criminality: “[T]he nature of a deportable crime was determined by a rather vague standard, ‘a crime involving moral turpitude’; and a time limit of commission of the crime ‘within five years after entry’ was included in the interest of fairness, in the case of a single offense” (133-134). As I discussed in this project’s introduction, the 1924 act introduced the concept of the “illegal alien” into US legal and popular lexicon; the term was primarily assigned to individuals who were assumed to be of Mexican descent.
Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez affirm the increasing presence of Mexican immigrants in the first few decades of the twentieth century: “[A]t least half a million Mexicans entered the United States legally between 1899 and 1928. United States census takers in 1930 calculated that approximately 1,422,533 Mexican Nationals and Mexican Americans lived in the United States” (9). In her monograph Impossible Subjects, Mae Ngai contends, “Mexican immigration in the United States peaked in the mid-1920s and continued at high levels through the end of the decade … The rapidly changing environment [from European to Mexican immigrant] produced new class relations thickly overlaid with race” (52). Balderrama and Rodríguez, and Ngai illustrate that US immigration policies increasingly framed Mexican immigrants as antithetical to the US national imaginary as the visible presence of the “Mexican” body within the US nation-state increased. As immigration policies framed Mexicans as “criminals,” domestic attitudes towards Mexicans framed the perceived “newcomers” as unwelcome intruders.

Popular stereotypes of Mexicans during the 1930s evidence this position: The stereotype of the Mexican “slacker” pervaded the national imaginary in the 1930s. Balderrama and Rodríguez cite a “typical” letter to Franklin Roosevelt from a private citizen, L. Clark, to illustrate the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes assigned to Mexicans during the Great Depression: “‘Our towns are over run with the Mexican population. They breed like rats, live in huts, mostly are dependent on day labor. Thus they run heavily on charity both medical and food supplies’ … Regretfully, Clark’s racist tirade represented the thinking of many well-meaning Americans” (100). Representations of Mexicans in Spratling and Porter’s stories implicitly reproduced these stereotypes. For example, in “Lola,” Spratling emphasizes Lola’s sexual promiscuity and her dependence upon her employment in his service. By doing this, Spratling
suggests that Lola is impoverished and sexually deviant, much like the “Mexicans” Mr. Clark describes in his letter.

Moreover, as immigration policies and popular stereotypes drew attention to the US-Mexican border as the entrance point (rather than Angel or Ellis Island, for example) for these “slackers,” its role in the US national imaginary changed. Instead of being a site of constant movement for Americans and Mexicans, the border became an impenetrable barrier. Balderrama and Rodríguez elucidate why the border’s role changed during the Great Depression: Border “[r]egulations were loosely enforced when Mexican workers were needed to harvest crops or increase production in the mines or on the assembly lines. Conversely, the strict letter of the law was applied when Mexican labor exceeded the seasonal demand” (11). The collapse of the economy during the Great Depression necessitated (at least in the national imaginary) a more permanent shift to the latter attitude toward immigration. Additionally, while the border became an impenetrable barrier for Mexicans crossing into the US, it became the site of mass removal of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans from the US: deportation and repatriation became the means by which subjects that immigration policies and popular stereotypes coded as antithetical to and outside of the US national imaginary were physically removed from the nation-state.

Deportation and repatriation were two coercive methods the US federal and state governments undertook during the Great Depression to force Mexicans (or, perceived Mexicans) out of the US. According to Ngai, deportation was a response to economic insecurities that fed racial animosity. She suggests that “[t]he movement did not distinguish between legal immigrants, illegal immigrants, and American citizens. Mexican Americans and immigrants alike reaped the consequences of racialized foreignness” (Ngai 71). In the context of my project, I contend that Spratling and Porter’s homogenous racialized representations of indigenous
Mexicans reaffirm that all peoples of Mexican descent (or, assumed Mexican descent) warranted treatment as the “other” in the US national imaginary and exclusion from the US nation-state. Balderrama and Rodríguez add that deportation, among other hostile practices, “remains an acceptable or legitimate right of a sovereign government to get(ing) rid of unruly, unpopular or unwanted elements in any given society” (63). Mexicans became a “convenient scapegoat” during the 1930s: deporting Mexicans became a superficial relief effort that satiated ideological fears rather than economic realities. By effacing contemporary deportation practices in their stories, Spratling and Porter obfuscate the US’s role in their narratives of Mexican economic strife.

A separate, but related process of coerced migration coincided with these forced deportation practices: repatriation. Balderrama and Rodríguez concisely define how repatriation was imagined differently from deportation:

Repatriation endeavors, unlike those concerning deportation, as a general rule did not involve the federal government … The intent of repatriation was threefold: to return indigent nationals to their own country, in this case Mexico; to save welfare agencies money; and to create jobs for real Americans. These concepts were reinforced and justified by the prevailing belief that ‘those people would be better off in Mexico with their own kind.’ (120)

These concurrent deportation and repatriation efforts effectively demonstrate how the public and private spheres united during the Great Depression to define the national imaginary against the Mexican “other.”

Repatriation efforts during the Great Depression found precedent in similar practices in the years following WWI. Between 1920 and 1921 about “100,000 Mexicans” repatriated to
Mexico following “anti-Mexican campaigns” by native-born white Americans (Kanstroom 156-157). Ngai illustrates the international dynamics of this early repatriation program. Sponsored by the Mexican *Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores*, Mexicans living the US were enticed with “‘free return transportation to the Mexican interior and subsistence’” (Ngai 72).² Despite the appearance of international cooperation, repatriation placed a heavy burden on Mexico’s economy.

Balderrama and Rodríguez detail several problems incurred by repatriation. As the US suffered an economic recession during these years (foreshadowing the decade to come), some Mexicans returned to Mexico believing in the ideals of the Revolution (Balderrama and Rodríguez 162). However, the Mexican government could not afford to support these returning Nationals; while “American businesses and local authorities were asked to assist in funding passage to the border,” large-scale US cooperation never transpired (162-163). Returning Mexicans were faced with a lack of resources and little hope for government aid. Balderrama and Rodríguez contend that this early dilemma influenced the Mexican government’s response to larger repatriation of the 1930s: “Its [the Mexican government’s] stance against assuming fiscal responsibility for repatriation remained a guiding principle” (163). Again, by effacing the mass movement of people across the US-Mexican border, Spratling and Porter denied the US’s role in the economic burdens Mexico faced during the 1930s. Instead, the authors tied the failing Mexican economy to Mexico’s failure to modernize, rationalizing the processes of US economic and cultural intervention Porter and Spratling ostensibly detested, but implicitly reproduced.³

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² Ngai differs from Kanstroom on one major point: Ngai contends that this first repatriation occurred from 1920-1923, not 1920-1921 as Kanstroom states (72). Additionally, Balderrama and Rodríguez place the number of repatriates during this time at “111,979” (162).

³ For example, Porter discusses the corrupted pulque industry in “Hacienda,” eliding the US’s role in the process. See my analysis of this passage in Chapter 2.
Final Thoughts

The title of my project, “Real? Hell, Yes, It’s Real. It’s Mexico” exemplifies how Spratling and Porter understood their representations of Mexico. It is inspired by Spratling’s defense of *Little Mexico* in 1956 when an interviewer questioned the book’s accuracy. Simmen describes the exchange in the introduction to *Gringos in Mexico*:

> Twenty-five years after its first publication, an interviewer asked him if his collection was ‘completely non-fiction, or did you use a little writer’s prerogative here and there.’ Without pausing, he [Spratling] blurted: ‘Hell, yes, it’s real. It’s Mexico.’ I know of no one who would disagree with him. His collection is a classic. (xli)

Providing the inspiration for my project, Spratling’s persistent claims of authenticity cogently summarize the attitudes with which he and Porter approached their representations of Mexico and Mexicanness. Moreover, this passage demonstrates the popular response of their works’ scholars. Simmen, in addition to other biographers of Spratling and Porter (such as Taylor D. Littleton and Janis P. Stout, respectively) praise these authors’ stories for their sympathetic portrayals of Mexican identity and experience. However, my project offers an alternative reading of their works.

In this project, I analyzed the works of William Spratling and Katherine Anne Porter through their mutual literary kinship and in the context of US nation-building projects in the 1930s to counter dominant interpretations of their work. I suggest that it is imperative to read their work through this lens in order to illustrate how Spratling and Porter’s stories implicitly reified the US national imaginary of the time. Their stories reproduced racialized stereotypes of Mexicans in the US during the Great Depression that informed how Mexico became the “other” in the national imaginary. Furthermore, Spratling and Porter’s texts reproduced the logic of US
economic and cultural intervention in Mexico. Through these two joint processes, the stories I analyze in this project supported a narrative of US racial and cultural superiority constructed against a parallel narrative of Mexican inferiority that was central to the formation of the US national imaginary during the Great Depression.
WORKS CITED


