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A 'Living Art': Working-Class, Transcultural, and Feminist Aesthetics in the United States, Mexico, and Algeria, 1930s

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A ‘LIVING ART’: WORKING-CLASS, TRANSCULTURAL, AND FEMINIST AESTHETICS IN THE UNITED STATES, MEXICO, AND ALGERIA, 1930S

A Dissertation Presented
by
TABITHA A. MORGAN

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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A ‘LIVING ART’: WORKING-CLASS, TRANSCULTURAL, AND FEMINIST AESTHETICS IN THE UNITED STATES, MEXICO, AND ALGERIA, 1930S

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by

TABITHA A. MORGAN

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Joseph Bartolomeo, Department Head
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the many people, spaces and moments of life that have held me and let me go – from Manning Lane and Narberth to Mallorca and Berkley and Honesdale, and most recently from Bangor to Northampton and Holyoke and back home to Philly once again.
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Towards the end of her life, Dorothea Lange said: “How much I would really like to devote myself to really living the kind of life that I know it takes.” To the tribe I am lucky enough to call home, may we all know what it takes and devote ourselves to it fully. In gratitude and awe for all the fierce and patient loving that has gotten me through this part of the journey: Ksenya, Stella, Gordito, Mom, Donn, Robin, Laurel, Gram, Josie, Jo, Carol, Cathy, John, Angie, Tim, Herve, Raihana, Julie, Myla, and Kelly – you are brave and generous souls, and I deeply thank you and most sincerely love you.

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ABSTRACT

A ‘LIVING ART’: WORKING-CLASS, TRANSCULTURAL, AND FEMINIST AESTHETICS IN THE UNITED STATES, MEXICO, AND ALGERIA, 1930S

MAY 2012

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The cultural productions of Katherine Anne Porter, Anita Brenner, Tina Modotti, Maria Izquierdo, and Juanita Guccione represent a distinctive interweaving of gender and class consciousness, national identification and political resistance, as represented in their artistic work. These five women became transnational carriers of a radical realist and modernist thought, culture, and ideology that became transported through their art when their gendered and classed bodies were left otherwise silenced and boundaried. These women, their cultural productions, and the ways in which their art generates a counter discourse to the dominant and institutionalized conceptions of transculturalism, aesthetics, and re-production, are vital to understanding the co-construction of nationhood as well as the self-determined creation of the individual self. From this overarching framework, I will explore how these women negotiated political conceptions of nationhood, artistic genres such as realism and modernism, and then created their own feminist, transcultural and working-class aesthetics to counter otherwise limited conceptions of individual agency.
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INTRODUCTION

BORDERS UNBOUND: TRANS-NATIONAL/-CULTURAL WORKING-CLASS
WOMEN ARTISTS DIALOGUING WITH THE NATION AND SELF

“Visualization is often a precursor to mobilization”

Paula Rabinowitz They Must Be Represented.

From the turn of the 19th century and well into the 1930s, the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world was perpetually conflicted, ambiguous, and yet because of this tension, wholly intimate. After World War I, a new understanding of global consciousness was being negotiated, and the US appeared to intentionally position itself against the rest of the world in establishing economic and foreign policies that were oftentimes transmitted through the cultural wars of which country had the “highest” art. While my first three chapters focus exclusively on US-Mexico relations, and my fourth on Algeria, my larger intention is to explore how these five individual women negotiated multiple nations and genres in order to create their own language, their own gender, class and transcultural aesthetic, despite the overwhelming opposition to such expressions in their era.

To begin with the US and Mexico, we see a centuries-long disconnect and power struggle that has yet to be resolved in any productive way for either country. At the turn of the century, each country had its own civil discords, wars, and revolutions to negotiate, but these national histories are often relegated to a mutually exclusive understanding of
how each came to their own sense of nationhood before and after World War I. At this
time the two countries did co-construct each other historically, economically, and most
importantly for my interest in transnationalism, artistically. Specifically, Mexico in the
1920s was in a post-revolution cultural blossoming where politics and the arts were
inseparable from constructing a modern conception of nationalism. Similarly, the United
States was negotiating a new, post-World War I understanding of itself, but by the ‘30s
was doing so in the Depression and New Deal era of simultaneous economic downfall
and cultural reclamation. Each of the US-Mexican women I am focusing on had a
multiperspectival relationship to multiple countries, their respective politics, and the
marketplace every nation created for artistic productions. Whether it is Maria Izquierdo,
the first Mexican woman to have a solo show in the United States, or Juanita Guccione
who traveled the Sahara with a Bedouin tribe, each woman had a singular relationship to
multiple countries which allowed them varying perspectives of nationhood and
belonging. The ways in which these women negotiated borders, understood politics and
utilized artistic frameworks in order to create a particular sense of selfhood and
aesthetics, are central to both their art and their nations.

There are three overarching tenets I will explore while dialoguing with the
cultural productions of Katherine Anne Porter, Anita Brenner, Tina Modotti, Maria
Izquierdo, and Juanita Guccione: One, the transnational and transcultural border-crossing
sojourns of individuals that forces us to consider the construction of nationhood. Two,
how the dominant artistic genres of Realism, Modernism, and Surrealism were utilized or
eschewed as a springboard for their artistic forms, chosen mediums, and female voices;
Three, in the creation of their own individualized voices, how these women generated
their own gender and class aesthetic within the broader landscape of the era’s political nationalism and the creation of their individual senses of self.

First, I am navigating the concepts of transnationalism and transculturalism by exploring how Mexico and the US co-created their particular nation-state identities through artistic border crossing. The 1930s are a pivotal time for both the arts and for inter-national political reformation; how these two otherwise divergent issues communicate with each other is a pivotal moment for both countries. Both countries had a historically-specific national investment in culture and the arts in creating their identities, while at the same time battling themselves and each other for power and thereby creating a mutual yet almost always antagonistic co-identity formation. In *Imagining the Americas: Toward a Transnational Frame*, Shukla and Tinsman argue that exploring global communities is one way to see transnationalism take shape despite or even through divisions and boundaries. “Locating such efforts in the geographical and imaginative possibilities of region is one way to introduce important questions of time and space into deeply politicized debates about nation-states and how their peoples relate to one another” (emphasis in original; Shukla and Tinsman 1-2). Of particular interest for us, is what necessity compels these women to cross borders into deeply politicized spaces, what impact their relationship to multi-national identities has on their art, in what ways their art is received in both countries, and what this says about their art, their nations, and their relationship to the national, transnational, and transcultural.

Anita Brenner wrote in her historical account of the Mexican Revolution, *The Wind That Swept Mexico* (1943), “We are not safe in the United States, now and henceforth, without taking Mexico into account; nor is Mexico safe disregarding us” (3).
Our necessary interdependence is not simply geographic, Brenner argues, but it is also that our borders are living histories that tell the story of Mexico’s “crucial position in hemispheric politics and culture” (4) which in turn shapes how the United States understands its own self, a transaction these artists have witnessed and represented. Brenner echoes what Cuba’s Jose Marti famously voiced in his 1891 essay, “Our Americas” when he wrote, “The scorn of our formidable neighbor [the United States], who does not know us, is the greatest danger of our America; and it is imperative that our neighbor know us, and know us soon, so she shall not scorn us, for the day of the visit is at hand” (Marti 149-50). This urgent call by both Brenner and Marti, though more than 50 years apart, for both American hemispheres to reconcile their individual national identities with the identity of the other, has yet to lessen even in the 21st century. I hope, then, to dialogue about the ways in which these five artists contributed through their transnational and multicultural art to co-create any sense of nationhood for both Americas.

I will do this specifically by looking at issues of why and how a traditionalista movement helped to further the post-revolution consciousness of Mexico, and that similarly, a realist and documentary mode took precedence over the romanticized Victorian era in the US, in order to propel a more politicized consciousness around race, class, and gender in constructing a new world order at the turn of the century. “Between 1829 and 1867, Mexico was four times invaded by foreign powers: Spain in 1829, France in 1838 and 1861, and the United States in 1846” (Vaughn and Lewis 3). This led to Mexico privileging “Aztec civilization for its resistance to foreign conquest” and so began the idealizing indigenous cultures. Mexicanidad, the privileging of all things
Mexican, was based upon the belief that the indigenous Indian population embodied a counter-revolution to colonization, industrialism, and cultural imperialism from Western nations. This was largely manifested through the government declarations of President Alvaro Obregon, who believed a populist image would unify his regime under a banner of national identity of indigenismo, and Jose Vasconcelos, Minister of Education, who “advocated a nationalist regeneration that was sympathetic to the rural masses, but one that avoided sinking into what he saw as the morass of provincial and lower-class ignorance” (Lopez 29). This artistic renaissance and class elitism were safeguarded by the fact that the government was in complete control of both ideologically, artistically, and financially.

In the United States, the turn of the century was characterized by a desire for an Americanism that was based on American Exceptionalism. Carrie Tirado Bramen in The Uses of Variety: Modern Americanism and the Quest for National Distinctiveness writes that “Certain writers and thinkers sought to redefine or modernize a national identity, in which diversity was not cast as a barrier to modernization but as its fullest expression.” Specifically, diversity and the “masses” were beginning to be celebrated as a “benign and democratic force that is expressive of the cosmopolitanism of the nation” (Tirado Bramen 5). This ideological shift of the early 1900s paved the way for the cultural reclamation of the 1930s. Alan Trachtenberg writes that in the 1930s, “the cry was not so much for change as for ‘recovery,’ a return to basic values, to fundamental Americanism…The keynote of the 1930s was the idea of culture, a search in the everyday life and memories of ‘the people’ for what was distinctively American” (247). This was done – ideologically, artistically, and financially – through the government’s WPA, FSA, etc.
programs. It is fascinating that in a country that is post-revolution and another that is in a cataclysmic financial devastation, both governments and nations turn to art to reclaim their identities. And while it attempted to be an art based on otherwise marginalized populations (women, workers, Natives), it was a highly problematic time of questionable representation, the performativity of tropes and sentimentalisms, and the government-controlled distribution of images romanticizing a poverty that at times they failed to alleviate or even address directly. These five women artists, however, wanted to revolutionize that colonized and hierarchical dynamic by creating both a Realism and a Surrealism that supported and imagined the Other with the collusion of the Other, rather than appropriating his romanticized image and in despite of his actual existence. It is through this transcultural realization of artistic texts that allowed for nationhood to be written anew within the individualized voices of gendered, classed, and ethnic women rather than written on their indigenous bodies and historicized images.

In *The Borderlands of Culture*, Ramon Saldivar argues that “the transnational imaginary is an epistemically valuable way of describing our place in the world and understanding the meanings we ascribe to it and perform on it. When coupled with the notion of social aesthetics, it provides a suitable context for interpreting the complex dialectics of political, radical, and gender forms on the border as reflected in much of the best writing, folklore, popular performance, and music of borderland dwellers” (15). Cultural productions, particularly those of working class women, further our conceptions of what is moveable through and valued by national boundaries of art, identity, and politics. Interrogating the raced, gendered, and classed space of nationhood through the
discourse of working-class and transnational women allows us to expand the borders of our own perspective and merge into the transcultural.

I am using the term transcultural to reference a specifically border-crossing approach to the production and reception and even style of artistic work. Transculturalism has been variously defined by Fernando Ortiz as a mere substitute for the term acculturation (qtd. in Saldívar 195). Mary Louise Pratt has extended more agency to the native culture by insisting that transculturation also includes how “subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (emphasis added; Pratt 6). Ramon Saldívar echoes this by writing that “Transculturation is not a matter of evading the dominant culture, but of choosing how one must confront it” (196). He furthers this argument by adding that transculturation also includes “the many deconstructions of the hegemony of a fictive modernist autonomy and unity to consider why certain positions within modernism have been kept from consideration” (196). Following this line of inquiry, I will investigate the ways in which a transcultural movement embodies both a literal and geographical movement of national borders, as well as the ways in which this move signals a metaphorical and artistic need to move from Romanticism to Realism and Modernism in order to expand individual agency in the uses of a multicultural and multiperspectival representations of everyday reality.

Second, I am looking at the established artistic frameworks of the era, primarily Realism and Surrealism, in order to see how Mexican and American artists picked up the nationally dominant dialogue to accomplish their individual agenda-driven discourse. The ways in which these genres shaped national, communal understandings in the
construction of each sense of nationhood, are, as stated by Saldivar above, underestimated in the co-construction of both countries. Often, Europe is considered the sole influence when looking at the convergence of nation formation and literary standards. This framework furthers a Westernized conception of not only which and whose “reality” is validated, but also how that singular reality is substantiated, transmitted, and perpetuated through Eurocentric dominated language and visual representation. Exposing the ways in which Mexico and the United States re-appropriated the Realist form to disseminate their own reality challenges the normalized singularity of perception and its resultant power inequities. Consequently, in countries such as the US and Mexico, Realist documentation took on overtly political connotations with vastly important artistic and national consequences, devoid of instruction from the European academy/standard. In question here is the extent to which these artists employed any national, literary standard in creating a discourse for their art, why they would (not) choose to utilize an already established framework, and when and how they diverge from this form to achieve their own language, vision, and image.

For Tina Modotti, realist documentation was intrinsic to representing Mexico, its struggles, its peoples, and the relationship of the two. For Maria Izquierdo, a modernist Surrealism allowed for a personal investigation of politics and individual autonomy that Realism otherwise denied. Similarly for Katherine Anne Porter, Realism was a way to expose the “truth” of Mexico and the Mexican people that she believed were not otherwise characterized in any multidimensional way in the States. This re-appropriation of the Realist mode is inseparable from understandings of Modernism as well; namely, the ways in which politics and the economy figure into creating a working-class
consciousness and visual representation of the 1920s and 30s, which in turn leads to a modern consciousness about how nationhood construction informs the individual, particularly artists.

As Tace Hedrick argues in *Mestizo Modernism: Race, Nation, and Identity in Latin American Culture, 1900-1940*, we need to further explore the “ways the nations to the south of the United States negotiated and represented to themselves the profound social, cultural, and economic shifts in self-perception brought about by modernizing influences” (2). Particularly for the intersection of nation, modernism, and artistic representation, Hedrick further argues, that for popular artists the “racial nature of these artists’ bodies [such as Frida Kahlo’s] (ameliorated to some degree by their social class) and, even more importantly, their representation of their own bodies as raced and gendered determined what their stakes were in proposing images of the new or the modern” (7). Hedrick’s framework is similar to my own, except that I will be focusing on working-class women’s art in order to further underscore the ways that a (still) silenced dialogue about class and gender is absent from dialogues about nation and transculturalism. How these women converse with nationalized, established, and therefore arguably formulaic, literary modes of discourse, and the ways they consequently diverged, allow us to establish their relationship to nationally prescribed modes of private to public discourse. This further allows us to trace a possible progression of cultural agency for how these artists then generated their own language and aesthetics, unique to their desires and not otherwise valued by the national discourse. Simply put by Doris Sommer, “culture creates agency.” What can be seen as part of her definition of cultural agency, Sommer argues that “Where structures and conditions can
seem intractable, creative practices add dangerous supplements that add angles for intervention and locate room for maneuver” (3). This, then, leads us to wander from a nationalized and then genre-dominated sense of self to where and when working-women created their own individualized aesthetic in order to belong to a nation and its prescribed identity.

My third and final argument is about establishing each woman’s individual relationship to multiple countries and connecting that to larger mediating formats of artistic production, so that we can investigate how they personally created a particular art that wielded an externally manifested aesthetic of and for their internal gender and class self. In exploring the ways in which each of these artists negotiates her gender, class, national origin, country of adoption, and artistic productions we can then argue for a specifically class and gender aesthetic that creates an inimitable discourse surrounding the forging of a national identity and that nation’s visual representation of itself. For instance, in post-revolutionary Mexico the indigenous, mixed race, often exclusively female, body was used as a national marker for the newly assimilated, proletariat model of national, *indigenismo*, politics and economics. How, then, did Modotti’s relationship to her adopted nation coincide with or interrupt her conceptions and subsequent use of national markers? How did her relationship to a gender aesthetic confront a use of an indigenous, female model and to expose what intention? Similarly, how did she understand and argue for or against a re-production of politics, women workers, and *indigenismo* to realize the internal discourse she communicated only through her art? In coming full circle, we can see how a trans-national/cultural perspective informs a gender and class aesthetic.
Through prioritizing the role of art as a voiced medium for otherwise silenced — working, female, ethnic — bodies, we are called upon to question the mobility of the artist’s body in this historically specific moment. To that end, I am defining “gender aesthetic” and “class aesthetic” as an artistic text that deals specifically with gender or class from a specifically gender or class conscious creator; more often than not a woman artist of working-class or immigrant background that is coming from that intentionally defined space. As Hilde Hein and Carolyn Korsmeyer write in *Aesthetics in Feminist Perspective*, “Because awareness of gender necessarily directs one’s attention not only to the act of perception but also to the perceiver and her or his position within a social or political context, one of the revisions that feminism implies is the abandonment of the doctrine that a disinterested state of contemplative attention characterizes aesthetic appreciation and appropriate apprehension of art” (xiii). The female artists and their work are therefore generally attempting to force a re-negotiation of the otherwise strict, socially defined terms of “gender” and “class” and even “art.” This forceful negotiation is both private and public, in that each individual artist is dialoging with a publicly defined role for herself, creating on canvas or paper an image of how she is negotiating that, and then recasting it back into the public, political sphere. This creates an entirely new stage, language, and representation by which to access an individual and communal multiperspectival understanding of gender, class, and nation.

The fluidity and subjectivity that is allowed to art and culture counter the usually essentialized and categorical definitions for classed, raced, and gendered bodies and artistic producers. In the 1900s, women’s participatory role in cultural production has been multilayered and abundant, yet it has historically been relegated to a static space in
the otherwise progressive genre of art: woman as (sculpted) subject, woman as (pedestaled) object, woman as (inspiring) muse, woman as (romanticized) aesthetic. Yet within this there are two components that intertwine to create a new thread: the woman’s body as canvas and conveyer of politicized art, and the woman’s gaze as gendered artist in a marketplace that consumed, re-produced, and transacted her image. When women artists appropriated their own image they became merchants in the global transaction of re-production. This re-production was not centered in the woman’s body, as her 19th century biological determinisms would have her, and further it was not confined to societal demarcations of ideological and moral expectations as cultural carrier. Women’s artistic re-production was instead positioned within the power designated in a woman’s gaze upon her own image, re-cast into the public sphere, and thereby allowing for gendered political influences and social consequences.

A feminist aesthetic in particular continually seeks to question age-old debates surrounding women’s visibility, the re-production of their image and body, the manipulation of their sexuality, the societal constructions of their gender and gender roles, and lastly and most importantly, the ways in which women artists then re-appropriate and re-position all of these by being the creators of their image, body, style, canvas, form and function. A feminist aesthetic does not necessarily have to be political. Yet, because the basic art historical, art critical and art theoretical terminology has largely been gender based and created and used in a solely patriarchal sphere, it stands to reason that any female artist’s work – from its inception to its manifestation and final reproduction in society – is an act of subversion and therefore politicized.
At the turn of the century and into the ‘30s, gender and class took on entirely new definitions parallel to shifting notions of mobility and national allegiance. Simultaneously conceptions of “high” and “low” artistic valuation continued to take on critical political and national weight in the ever expanding commodity culture of Post-World War I global industrialism. Specifically, these women’s bodies were often maligned with their art as “low” class and “low” culture thereby creating an entirely classed and gendered language surrounding the valuation of bodies, production, representation, and aesthetics. Such internalizations of politicized spaces is especially poignant for the transnational women artists working in the 1930s. Deborah Barker in *Aesthetics and Gender in American Literature* writes,

The same evolutionary theories of aesthetics that were used to marginalize the woman artist and to question the merit of her original productions were inextricably linked to representations of the ‘uneducated masses’ (whether lower-class European immigrants or recently migrated southern blacks) as a hindrance to cultural evolution. According to these theories, the woman artist was perceived as lacking the creative genius to produce original works of art, while the immigrant masses were perceived as lacking the aesthetic judgment to recognize and appreciate ‘true’ art. Therefore, if the woman artist attempted to promote her own work, she contributed to the devolution of artistic standards, creating an unrefined mass audience for her inferior work. (15).

Society’s linking of women and the “uneducated masses” in the realm of cultural production creates a new way to thread together class, ethnicity, and gender, and to see what the social, political, and personal responses such a collision brings about.
Chapter One, “‘Inherited Images’: Katherine Anne Porter and Anita Brenner on Art, *Indigenismo*, and Working-Class and Transcultural Aesthetics,” juxtaposes the ways that both Brenner and Porter viewed, utilized, represented and re-presented indigenous folk and art work as a manifestation of counter-nationalist thought. Both women were raised in the United States, yet both felt inextricably tied to the Mexican political and artistic movement. In paralleling the artistic catalogues of each woman, we can see the ways in which they both confronted and utilized *anoranza* (nostalgia) as a Native versus Western political act. Because these two women created catalogues of Native artistic work, rather than creating their own folk art, we can also explore the ways in which a Western gaze, a gendered perspective, and a national re-identification complicates the Mexican-U.S. artistic marketplace.

Anita Brenner enters the aesthetic dialogue as an intellectual and academic, viewing *indigenismo* through an anthropological gaze, yet also as a multi-cultural woman. Though culturally born to Russian Jewish immigrants, Brenner was born and raised in Aguascalinetes, Mexico, then lived in San Antonio, Texas and then New York City as an adult. Illustrating her complex relationship to nationalism, Brenner was honored for a lifetime of writing about Mexico and was granted the Aztec Eagle – the highest award given by the Mexican government to foreigners – but which she promptly refused on the grounds that she was Mexican by birth. This highly complex and tense self-identification with nationalism and cultural citizenship informs her most comprehensive anthropological but still little known work, *Idols behind Altars* (1929) – for which Tina Modotti and Edward Weston did all the photographs.
Katherine Anne Porter was born in India Creek, Texas in 1890, and while her relationship to her Southern roots is often discussed as a primary trope of her writing, it is her self-imposed exile away from the South and her expatriate move to Mexico which most informs our conceptions of the transcultural. Porter’s short story “Hacienda” and her journalistic essays on Mexican politics, such as “The Mexican Trinity” (1921), are telling examples of how she intended to explore a Mexicana epistemology and promote the arts as a vital necessity to political and national progress. Yet it is her most unknown work which is our primary concern.

*Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts* (1922) was republished by Ruth M. Alvarez and Thomas E Walsh in their 1993 *Uncollected Early Prose of Katherine Anne Porter*. Porter’s *Outline* was intended to be a catalogue for an eventual traveling exhibit of Mexican arts. I am interested in comparing Porter’s *Outline* to Brenner’s *Idols*, as intricate and complicated works that detail artistic works of indigenous Mexicans as political texts. As well, I am interested in seeing how these critical and expository texts created cross-cultural, cross-border conversations. Lastly, I am concerned with the ways that Porter internalized and utilized the transnational market and multi-country depictions of nationhood in order to realize her own aesthetics. As Joan Givner, a Porter biographer, notes, Porter “incorporated her ideas on Mexican art into her own aesthetic theory” (qtd. in Robinson 68). I am hoping to explicate the ways this becomes a two-way dialogue through and in the United States and Mexico.

In Chapter Two, “Art for the Real: Tina Modotti’s Gender and Class Aesthetic for the Masses” focuses on the ways in which Modotti consciously engaged in creating a *historia grafica* (pictorial history) through the documentary medium of the camera, and
intimately connected the agency of a female photographer to her use of indigenous female subjects in a particularly politicized way. This creates not only a wholly and innovatively gendered approach to the dismantling of women as object/subject but also a new way in which to understand the historical and political processes that appropriate and employ such images. In other words, Modotti’s cultural work creates not only a new framework by which to understand women and art, but her visual work also creates a new language by which to translate women’s internal negotiations of external social phenomenon. What this means for certain women in particular – ethnic, working-class, immigrant – adds still another layer of communication, and yet another language we are still struggling to learn.

Chapter Three, “‘The Realest Reality: Maria Izquierdo, Mexicanidad, and the Aesthetics of Nation and Self’ I will be focusing on the ways in which a specifically feminist artist, Maria Izquierdo, co-constructed a political stance against Mexico’s government, its nationalistic artists, and their racialism and patriarchy. Izquierdo began her artistic career aligned with the Mexican Muralists, patronized by Rufino Tamayo and Diego Rivera. Yet she soon enough disconnected herself from them and instead aligned herself with the avant-garde group the Contemporaneos. The Contemporaneos believed that the Muralists had become too entrenched with the nationalists and the Western capitalists who used a conception of male dominance and power as a structural framework for defining national identity. The Contemporaneos heralded Izquierdo’s work as an “opposition to the Muralists [and] as a representative of cultural nationalism ‘beyond’ politics and closer to the ‘purity’ of indigenous culture” (Greely). In this specific way, Izquierdo’s work becomes a way to read Mexican nationalism as a struggle
between the modernizing forces of industrialism and transglobal capitalism versus the modernist tendencies to appropriate indigenous populations for their very anti-modern and romanticized ontology. The ways in which Izquierdo re-produces the representations of the female body, the *Mexicanidad* traditions, and the political climate of her time, shows how entrenched her consciousness was in establishing a discourse of women as national creators not just national or bodily re-producers.

Chapter Four, “The White Witch”: Juanita Guccione’s Transcultural Aesthetic of Algeria and Feminist Aesthetic of a Transformative Self” will hopefully bring the relatively unknown artist Juanita Guccione into the full spotlight where she belongs. There are multiple reasons why Juanita Guccione is underrepresented in the art world despite her vast oeuvre, and according to an interview I conducted with Guccione’s son, Djelloul Marbrook, the reason his mother is still unrecognized in the artistic world is due in large part to the vastness of her collection, spanning more than 50 years, and the multiple genre changes she went through in almost every decade. Art critics, not able to concisely categorize her work, alienated her from critical circles. Her enigmatic and shifting personality presented difficulties as well; galleries found her erratic moods difficult to negotiate, and so she remained a silenced figure in the Modernist era. Despite her conflicts with the artistic world, her personal life and the art she created is entirely captivating and strongly lends itself to more clearly understanding the female-defined world she created on canvas.

Guccione painted for more than five decades, and almost every decade became its own world symbolizing another period of her life, often coinciding with a country or a man she partnered with. Never quite a realist or surrealist, Guccione seemed to rely
heavily on her imagination – something a Realist would never trust completely – to capture and convey multiple meanings simultaneously. First and foremost it is Juanita’s Algerian watercolors that inspire us to conversations on the transcultural. It is then her Jungian-inspired and dream-like meanderings in mixed media and oils that capture the gaze of the initiated. As French writer and poet Anais Nin once said of Guccione, “Our dreams are often diffuse and fragmented. Juanita makes them cohesive and clear, as clear as the daily word” (Qtd. from juanitaguccione.com). The female-dominated worlds Juanita creates speak at once to women’s unrealized power and also their ability to transform lives, all lives, from the canvas.

Finally, in my conclusion I bring together the overarching of concepts of trans-national/-cultural theory with the framework of Realism and Surrealism, as seen through the eyes of these artists’ feminist and class aesthetic, to come full circle into the bright possibilities of transformative aesthetics. As Acampora and Cotton argue in Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom (2007), “The core idea of aesthetic agency is that integral to our understanding of the world is our capacity for making and remaking the symbolic forms that supply the frameworks for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge” (5). They argue that women of color (the focal group of their collection) have created social change through making and remaking the “gaze” and the body by employing aesthetic agency. What happens when we expand their definitions to include women who identify themselves by nation rather ethnicity? Further, what happens when we utilize the same framework of transformative aesthetics using class? And how do we re-read the historical era of the turn of the century when
using the language and the gaze of working, transnational women who as artists challenge our very *sight of Country, Woman, Labor, Art*?

Through exploring the cultural productions of these five women I hope to create a broadened understanding of who is allowed to be, or becomes representative of, the transnational, and the impact this has not only in the artistic world but also in the political and global worlds as well. Entering the dialogue of working class studies and feminist aesthetics I hope to broaden our conceptions of inter-American movements and the language and conceptions of working women artists in the construction of nationhood.

Ruiz and Sanchez Korrel argue that “historical agency involves not only individual decision making, but also ‘the creative orchestration of cultural elements.’” They go on to say that women’s motivation for resistant practices “should not be judged on a continuum with resistance on one end and accommodation on the other, but instead ‘should be placed within the centrifuge of negotiation, subversion, and consciousness’” (4). In this space of liminality and subversion, my primary intention with exploring what it means to have a gender and class aesthetic is to establish the ways that women, in taking control of the artist-subject and the artist’s-gaze, have utilized the political sphere of the 1930s Americas in order to re-appropriate an artistic calling that is solely theirs.

I believe in what Adrienne Rich confesses in *Arts of the Possible*: women have to reckon in and out of gender to do our work (7). I am most curious about how this consciousness, this intention, and the effort it entails, manifests itself in the world. Rich has gone on to say that women’s re-visioning is an act of survival, and that “A radical critique of literature [broaden to: art], feminist in impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine
ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh” (11).

The “liberated” works of Katherine Anne Porter, Anita Brenner, Tina Modotti, Maria Izquierdo, and Juanita Guccione exemplify the ways in which politically conscious female artists re-cast the historical representations of women to create a visceral, radical, responsive discourse that challenges why and how previously limiting images have dominated conceptions of gender, nation, ethnicity, transnationality, and class. Their revolution is a visual one; it is at once stripping the woman’s body of romanticized poverty and nationalistic and racial pride, and covering her with the aestheticized and real-ized image of a selfhood designed by an autonomous rendering of gender and class. Their art, then, becomes a voice for a battalion of other voices that persuade the masses towards the legitimacy of their own gaze and the cultural resistance that is loudly encoded in their art.
CHAPTER I

‘INHERITED IMAGES’: KATHERINE ANNE PORTER AND ANITA BRENNER ON ART, INDIGENISMO, AND WORKING-CLASS AND TRANSCULTURAL AESTHETICS

Katherine Anne Porter in *Outline of Mexican Arts and Crafts* (1922) and Anita Brenner in *Idols behind Altars* (1929) take an anthropological approach to indigenous Mexican art that can be seen as de-colonizing in its transcultural process. Mary Louise Pratt famously argued that transculturalism is when “subordinated or marginalized groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.” She writes that while the subjugated peoples cannot always control what is being put upon them, they do “determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, and what they use it for” (Pratt 6). In particular we see this transcultural process in the contact zone between the colonizers and the colonized in the early 1800s. Pratt writes that during that era “the European imagination produces archeological subjects by splitting contemporary non-European peoples off from their precolonial, even their colonial, pasts. To revive indigenous history and culture as archeology is to revive them as dead. The gesture simultaneously rescues them from European forgetfulness and reassigns them to a departed age” (Pratt 134). This is in large part realized because, unlike the 1820s, the 1920s were a space of revolution that heralded the Native Indian or Mexican as a pinnacle of cultural and artistic truth rather than “as dead” and under the control of the colonizer. In fact, the ancient past was so “living” to the modern Mexican nation that the very image and idea of the Native became the symbol for the modernizing
and progressive revolution. Yet there was a constant tension between the romanticization of the Native and/or working-class laborer and the Real Native (ways of) being.

As Maori anthropologist Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, “Indigenous attempts to reclaim land, language, knowledge, and sovereignty have usually involved contested accounts of the past by colonizer and colonized.” The tribe, community, or clan usually has a very different version of “facts” and “history” than is being produced and disseminated as “truth” by the dominant culture (33-4). This contact zone, then, between the modern culture’s utilization of the ancient lineage or image and the actual Native reality creates a third space; an historical “truth” that can be read and seen most apparently in art, as art becomes a visual representation by the Native craftsman and negotiated in the modern, Western reality.

Furthermore, art becomes the arbiter of its own kind of history and truth for three reasons. First, Native art represents the images of the colonized through their own self-determined gaze. As Tuhiwai Smith reminds us, for centuries most Native populations had to see their image reproduced only by colonizers; a reflection of their reality, as mediated through another’s lens, was held up in dominant society as real. She writes that the role and idea of “representation is important as a concept because it gives the impression of ‘the truth’” (35). Therefore, Native art is particularly powerful because the indigenous image, language, and even symbolism wasn’t often in indigenous control; the art that Porter and Brenner are showcasing to the world becomes an entirely new “truth,” an entirely new historical record. Second, this self-representation occurs through utilizing the transcultural artistic processes that occur as a result of colonization practices. In the
contact zone, the Native artist then determines not only his or her own image but also how that image will speak to their cultural lineage through an acculturated use of Western and indigenous artistic practices, mediums, and genres.

Lastly, it is through Porter and Brenner that we see and hear the indigenous voice and Native image; these two women – both white, both English speaking, both from working-class backgrounds – are in their own transcultural sphere of choosing what artifacts, what art, what images to give to Western audiences. I am arguing that Porter and Brenner are attempting a de-colonizing process in their own right. Decolonization is a “researching back” in the same tradition as “writing back” and “talking back” (Tuhiwai Smith 7). We are reminded that “research is not an innocent or distant academic exercise but an activity that has something at stake and that occurs in a set of political and social conditions” (Tuhiwai Smith 5). In particular, Porter and Brenner are writing in a highly charged time, a time of industrialism, modernization, and political revolution. They, too, believed that their research into Mexican art and history was heavily weighted, and they believed their contribution was helping to co-create a modern Mexican nation. With this intention, Porter and Brenner believed they were taking part in a decolonizing framework by fully engaging in a deconstruction of cultural and literal colonization by exploring and highlighting Native art in a way that is “taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voice to things that are often known intuitively” (Tuhiwai Smith 3). Both Porter and Brenner are highly conscious of the national theories and philosophies circulating Mexico at this time. In fact, when each writes her own account of Mexican art, she addresses at some point most of the issues of national identity, aesthetic intention, and race/class/gender undercurrents. To this end, I will be exploring the ways in which
Porter and Brenner highlight, illuminate, and problematize the issues of transculturalism, nation-building, and a decolonization of the racialized and classed bodies and aesthetics of the *indigenismo* movement.

Katherine Anne Porter and Anita Brenner both believed in Mexico, and they believed they *belonged* to it. The texts they wrote were meant to give back to the country that held their hearts and captivated their minds. Porter was a “careful crafter of fiction, using the classical concept of the artist as a ‘maker’ to describe the work of the artist” (Unrue *Understanding* 13). She believed in the power and sovereignty of the artist in a society, as well as the mythic symbolism of the artist as creator of his or her own journey. Anita Brenner, on the other hand, was a trained social scientist; she had a doctorate in anthropology and often approached Mexican art from a historian’s vantage point. That being said, she also felt that Mexico was a sacred and magical space, particularly during the revolution, and often talked about the artist’s role in creating a national identity. She writes, “The consciousness of self as Mexican is in everything that is done, and is taken for granted, not only as a good thing to be, but also as one of the reasons why further productive and creative things must be done” (Brenner 10). In this spirit, we will explore Porter’s gallery catalog of Mexico’s transnational art exhibit and Brenner’s anthropological treatise focusing on Mexican art and history.

Katherine Anne Porter was newly arrived in Mexico in November of 1920 when she “‘ran smack into’” the Obregón revolution (Porter qtd. in Unrue *Life* 73). The Mexican Revolution had begun in 1910 when “wealthy statesmen and reformer” Francisco Madero, in league with middle-class landowners and Emiliano Zapata and
Pancho Villa, overthrew leader Porfirio Diaz. Diaz reigned for more than 30 years through the tyranny of the Catholic Church, the oil company oligarchs, and the wealthy Mexican hacienda owners (Unrue Life 73). There were multiple contenders who wanted to rule the new Mexican nation, and more than 10 million people died during the ten years that civil war ensued. In late 1920, it was Alvaro Obregon who finally took the presidency, and whose rule was initially characterized by a renaissance both technological and artistic.

Obregon and Jose Vasconcelos, his Minister of Education, believed equally in the modernizing forces of the 20th century as well as a return to a more “primitive” and primal nature of man. While this may seem contradictory, it is explained through Vasconcelos’s “utopian treatise,” La Raza Cosmica, that imagines and argues for Latin America’s evolution from barbarism to enlightenment (Gallo 207). In 1929, when Vasconcelos published The Cosmic Race he expounded on the theories of the government and not only reconciled otherwise divergent philosophies but also gave the Obregon revolution a manifesto-inspired vision of the future. Like many socialists before him, Vasconcelos enumerates very specific stages that the people would have to undergo: the first stage is the “warrior age,” a period marked by domination and being ruled by brute force. The second stage is the “intellectual or political period” that is characterized by the development of laws, institutions and government programs in order to serve and protect the well-being of all citizens. The third stage is the pinnacle and goal: “the spiritual or aesthetic period” which is marked by all the Latin peoples having shed the first two stages, having no need for their animal instincts or for laws to dictate their actions because they are now living in “constant inspiration” and devoted to the “pursuit of
beauty” and “aesthetic pathos” (Gallo 207). Vasconcelos believed that Obregon was a kind of savior brought to Mexico to lead the people from the first stage to the final stage, and he saw himself as propelling the second stage of intellectualism by building art schools, public education programs, and massive public buildings like the national stadium. Once all the stages were completed and the literal foundations laid by the government, then the Cosmic Race would take over the world. This would happen during the third stage when the Cosmic Race, defined primarily by their inter-mixing of indigenous populations, would conquer “Anglotown” (North America) and create a “Universopolis” centered in Latin Americanness (qtd. in Gallo 208).

While the utopian vision of Vasconcelos and Obregon would not come to pass in entirety, we can see how the embracing of indigenismo is central to the creation of a modern and technologically advanced Mexico. Indigenismo is characterized by its commitment to the Native Latin American, economically, socially, and politically, and a renewed interest in Native art, artifacts, and aesthetics. Deeper than a simple valorization of ancient peoples, though, is the way that a modern Mexican national identity was founded in not only indigenismo but also mestizaje or Indo-Hispanic crossings. This ethnic inter-mixing becomes central not only to the aesthetic of modern Mexico and its national identity but also to Vasconcelos’ philosophy of the Cosmic Race – a race, a culture, a nation that is completely inter-mixed in every possible way.

Of primary importance to my overall argument of class, gender, and transcultural aesthetics is the way that modern Mexico embraced “the mixed-race individual…to serve for many as a symbol of racial and therefore national unity” in large part through the economically impoverished Indian population and through a now idealized and glorified
conception of women “as producers of the racialized bodies” that birth the Cosmic Race and modern Mexican identity (Hedrick 5). The artistic philosophy of the era, then, becomes the glorification of the Native, of the female body, and of the new nation. Diego Rivera’s murals and the performative dress and style of Frida Kahlo, all fit neatly into the new and ancient construction of modern Mexico. It is, as well, into this context that Katherine Anne Porter and Anita Brenner walk and begin to construct their own narratives of Mexican art, of a burgeoning national identity, and of their own transnational and transcultural journey into a sense of self.

Porter was announced into the chaos and electricity of Obregon and Vasconcellos’ revolution in the November issue of El Heraldo de Mexico: “‘Miss Katherine Anne Porter, a young writer of much charm and promise, has just arrived in Mexico from New York. She is here to study Mexico, and to gather material for a book and a great pageant-play on the stirring history of this romantic land’” (qtd. in Unrue Life 74). After being introduced to all the famous literary, artistic, and political figures of the area Porter settled on being the editor of the English language section of the El Heraldo de Mexico and teaching primary ballet in Vasconcelos’ Institute of social sciences (Unrue Life 74-5). Amongst all this fervor, her mind was still focused on writing, and how to capture all of the many layers and philosophies of the day; she writes:

Why not [write a] story on the impossibility of writing a story at short notice on Mexico? Maybe I shall write a few, but curiously enough – It may be five years before I can really write about Mexico…The thing is too complex and scattered and tremendous. I want first of all to discover for myself what this country is. Everybody I meet tells me a different story. Nothing is for me but to wait, and gather my own account. (qtd. in Unrue Life 76).
With this frame of mind, Porter connects with artist Xavier Guerrero to collaborate on an art exhibit and gallery catalogue.

“Under the auspices of the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Labor of Mexico” an exhibit of Mexican art was organized in order to be an international traveling show, one that could showcase Mexican art to the world (UEP 137). This exemplifies what the Mexican government believed was its mission: to glorify ancient Mexican art, and to fulfill stage two of the Cosmic Race, promote Mexican artistic achievement through government programs and sponsorship. Xavier Guerrero was its Art Director, and Porter “did a study” of the works which became the exhibition catalogue for the official “Traveling Mexican Popular Arts Exposition in the United States of North America” (UEP 137). The catalogue was roughly 51 pages long and included 22 illustrations; the exhibit itself held over 80,000 pieces of art. Jose Limon characterizes the Porter of this period as “a kind of cultural broker in the U.S. art world for socially committed artists” from Mexico (Limon 42). While this is probably true in hindsight, at the time Porter describes herself in less grandiose terms; she says: “‘I was almost the oldest person in the crowd. I was twenty-seven. Adolfo Best-Maugard was twenty-eight. But [Miguel] Covarrubias, who developed into a perfect genius of discrimination and selection, was about fifteen…All of us [were] taking advice from Jorge Encisco and Manuel Gambio in the National Museum. We collected it in about six months, and I did the monograph in about the same time’” (qtd. in Lopez 125).

1 UEP: Uncollected Early Prose of Katherine Anne Porter. Alvarez and Walsh, eds. CEOW: The Collected Essays and Occasional Writings of Katherine Anne Porter.

2 As Alvarez and Walsh introduce the essay, they write that Porter later stated her dissatisfaction with Outline, primarily because of the many errors present in its final publication. Guerrero sent Porter 500 copies of the catalog-essay before she could proof them. As Alvarez and Walsh have
Porter’s *Outline of Popular Mexican Arts and Crafts* begins her love affair with Mexico; it is a love letter to the *indigenismo* movement. It is also, along with her most popular fiction of the time – “Maria Concepcion,” “The Martyr,” “That Tree,” and “Flowering Judas” – an exploration of the energy and dynamics of the local towns, their residents, and the Native and foreign artists, all co-mingling and interacting to create a renaissance of unparalleled proportions. Yet when we read her non-fiction essays circa 1922 we see that Porter is not entering this relationship with Mexico naively or apolitically. And by the time we get to her late Mexican fiction of 1934, “Hacienda,” Porter is disillusioned and, as with many others, believes that the revolution has failed. *Outline* is, then, all the more important, not for its romanticizing of Mexico or its peoples, but because in that moment it gives voice to all the core possibilities and philosophies that any revolution has to offer. Yet as Porter herself astutely noted, “‘You know the trouble with every movement, every revolution, is that the people who do the work and do the fighting and bloodshedding and the dying, quite simply are not the people who run the thing afterwards’” (Qtd. in Lopez 124).

*Outline* is organized into four parts: Acknowledgment, Part I: Pre-Hispanic, Part II: Colonial Art, and Part III: The Present. It is a vast overview of many centuries of Mexican art and crafts put into 50 some odd pages. Its intention is clearly not to be authoritative or comprehensive as much as introductory and supportive. What is by far the most fascinating aspect is how Porter characterizes the role of ancient art in co-creating the contemporary Mexican identity and nation as mediated through the
indigenous movement. She does this in large part through establishing what she calls the “racial spirit” of Mexico. She then discusses how this “racial spirit” is disseminated through the art and then transnationally commodified through the marketplace, local or international. It is a multi-layered, and given the historical context and theories of the day, very complex essay that leads us in many directions. There are three primary issues – consequences, even – that surface when negotiating what Porter has abstractly defined as the “racial spirit” of the Native and Mexican peoples and these are: decolonization, commercialization, and transculturalism. Therefore, my overall exploration of Porter’s *Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts* is to see how she defines Mexico’s “racial spirit,” how she reads this as integral to the construction of Mexico’s modern, national identity, and what consequences these may have on the understanding of aesthetics as witnessed through the display, critique, and consumption of indigenous art.

Porter’s Acknowledgement section to *Outline*, written in May of 1922, thanks many artists and statesmen for their aid in helping her better “understand” Mexico and “remove the barriers of race, language and tradition that lay between [her] and the Mexican” (*UEP* 138). This beginning acknowledgment, in deference to her lack of ethnic connectivity to Mexico and its peoples, signals to the reader the immediate distance of the author to her subject and allows us to then read her with some objectivity. Yet Porter also makes it abundantly clear that she does feel a kind of organic or emotional connectivity to Mexico when she writes about her research process for her writings on Mexico, ‘I cannot say ‘I gathered material’ for it; there was nothing so mechanical as that, but the process of absorption went on almost unconsciously, and my impressions remain not merely as of places visited and people known, but as of a moving experience
of my own life that is now part of me” (CEOW 356). Despite the complicated personal relationship she has to her text, in the next breath, Porter persuades the reader of the authenticity of the text’s dialogue on Mexican artwork and its origins, stating that the “examples shown here were gathered from little country villages, from the common shops and street markets, where the native brings his goods to sell them to his own people” (139). This statement is revealing of both the integrity of Porter’s intentions and the ways that her essay as a whole may be problematic. First, the use of quaint and picturesque contextualizing reduces the seriousness of the art and keeps it trapped solely in its ethnic exchange, as well this localizing also traps the art in Porter’s point of view and not through the gaze or voice of the “country village” people buying and selling it because there are no interviews with the artists themselves. Second, Porter seems to be forcing the authenticity of the art through its regionalist market value: the Native is selling to another Native. She seems to be arguing that if the art is not co-opted by and for Westerners, it is not falsely constructed and reproduced in an age of mechanical sterility. This art, she seems to be saying, was captured in a moment of ethnic/ Native truthfulness, of Real market exchange outside of forced Western ideals and commodification. Interestingly enough, Porter’s other non-fiction essays, particularly “Why I Write About Mexico” (1923), address these issues directly.

Porter’s exploration of the authentic real versus a sense of commodified nation via Western standards in “Why I Write about Mexico” takes on a defensive posture because, she writes, “I have been accused by Americans of a taste for the exotic” (CEOW 356). Porter goes on to say that New York, not Mexico, is the most foreign of places she has known and compares the “broken, laboring tongues…of the dominant race” that she has
never considered anything but American. This establishes her sense of how racial and ethnic diversity co-create a nation’s identity, one which she sees as the quintessential strength of Mexico as well the United States. She writes,

My America has been a borderland of strange tongues and commingled races…[and that] the artist can do no more than deal with familiar and beloved things, from which he could not, and above all, would not escape. So I claim that I write of things native to me, that part of America to which I belong by birth and association and temperament...All the things I write of I have first known, and they are real to me. (CEOW 356).

Porter’s association of the “real” with her claim of familiarity dislodges critics from their rigid stance of opposition because she is placing her text, her gaze and voice, in her own subjective reality; Mexico is real to her because foreignness is native to her. Critics may not agree with her, but they are temporarily disarmed from arguing against her personal description of her individual understanding of what is her “familiar” and “beloved.”

She echoes this same sentiment of belonging when discussing Mexican art. She believes the art of Mexico is a “very powerful…a deeply racial and personal art” and she evidences her perspective of individual and national art through her lack of artifice surrounding her perspective of it:

I was not won to [Mexican art] by any artificial influence; I recognized it at once as something very natural and acceptable, a feeling of art consanguine with my own, unfolding in a revolution which returned to find its freedoms in profound and honorable sources. It would be difficult to explain in a very few words how the Mexicans have enriched their national life through the medium of their native arts. It is in everything they do and are. (CEOW 356).

Porter’s explanation of her interest in and writings about Mexican art form the basis of my discussion around her essays. Porter establishes her philosophy that the arts of
Mexico co-create a post-revolutionary Mexican identity of nationhood unlike anything we had seen before.

Katherine Anne Porter begins her exploration of Mexican art by delving far into the “Pre-Hispanic” past, presumably to find an almost spiritual connection between past and present. As well, she wholly explains the modern Mexican character as determined by both colonization and a romanticized blood lust of all things pagan, authentic, and natural. While this is clearly an over-inflated ethnocentric position to take, it is plausible in the context of her era. For instance, even Diego Rivera tried to find the “ideal painting technique” by using cactus juice as a binding agent for his mural paintings, just as the pre-Columbians did. “Rivera proudly asserted ‘that he was using the same process to decorate the walls of the Ministry of Education as the Aztecs had used in Tenochtitlan.’”

The problem being that in reality “the experiment proved to be a disaster when the mixture rotted and stained the murals, leaving them in the same ruined condition as the Aztec wall paintings” (Gallo 7). It is this level of performativity that Porter comes to eschew in Rivera and the “revolution artists” work as well as her own work.

Rob Johnson in “’A Taste for the Exotic’: Revolutionary Mexico and the Short Stories of Katherine Anne Porter and Maria Christina Mena” states that “Porter’s Mexico stories are self-consciously anti-romantic, and I believe this fundamental quality of her stories has to do with her attempt to distinguish her fiction about Mexico from Mexicans’ literature about themselves” (185). Whether the most famous artists of the day had ever met a Native American or not was inconsequential to their utilization and depiction of them. The artists took the idea of the Native, created a very specialized image of what
that would encompass, and created an entire genre around this illusion. There is a
constant tension between the authenticity of revolutionary change for both self and nation
and the romanticization of the images and ideals that spur the movement on.

The most fashionable stance for the artists was one of assimilated superiority,
showing how Mexicans have taken the best of the Natives, the whites, the Spaniards and
turned it back on them; ironically not competing with this is the notion that Mexicans –
but most specifically the Native population – has transcended all of this Western
colonization in favor of a “natural” and more authentic, pure life. The Native becomes the
sublime and all-encompassing answer, while the Westerner is a scapegoat and both a
symbol of progress and deterioration. Porter writes that descendants of early Mexicans
“patiently wrought in the arts after the design of the strangers, and continued thereby an
almost unbroken record of their own racial soul…Always the foreign influences have
been assimilated and transformed slowly into something incorruptibly Mexican, personal
to the race” (UEP 140). What seems a contradictory acculturation process becomes
instead Porter’s “diagnosis” of a well-honed cultural progression and her eventual
argument for a transcultural aesthetic.

It is Porter’s firm belief that acculturation through adaptation is the highest form
of not only perseverance but also of thriving and creating newer and better forms of art
and society. Mikhail Epstein writes that the transcultural “is not just a field of knowledge;
rather, it is a mode of being at the crossroads of cultures. A transcultural personality
naturally seeks to free his or her native culture…from self-deification or fetishism” (296).
In this way, Porter recognizes that the Native artist forages through his own fine art
traditions to find the best ideas and aesthetic renderings in order to dwell in a crossroads
with Europe’s fine art traditions. It is a resistance practice, a survival technique, and a long-standing tradition of incorporation.

In understanding the Mexican and Native populations Porter says we must “consult first the archeologists and scientists” (140). We must do this, in part, because they will “settle the question of the ancient races of Mexico” – whatever that question may be – is apparently vital because the Native, as the Real spirit and character of Mexico, builds a bridge between the arts and revolution and the ideal identity of the new nation. “They,” presumably the archeologists and scientists, “are agreed in this essential: the problem of the native is the problem of Mexico today” (140). The “problem” of the Native is, in part, one of conflicting ideals: the Native became the symbolic representation of all things spiritual and artistic, all things non-Western and public sphere-market driven. However, the Native, in reality, was oppressed and marginalized, a silent and impoverished peoples who had been left discarded in the pre-revolution quest for progress. In this context, then, we may better understand Porter when she says that the Indian’s future is invaluable, and must be secured. Modern sentiment of humanity and economic wisdom alike declare that the Indio has in the life of today his rights, his uses, and his destiny. For this it is necessary to arrive at an understanding of him. The one approach to such an eventuality is by way of comprehending first his contribution to society…and his contribution is beauty. (UEP 140).

Thus we come to a full-circle argument about the necessity of “understanding” the Native – through archeologists and scientists – in terms of his “usefulness” for humanity, economics and society, and how most importantly this is mediated through aesthetics and the Native’s art.
For the remainder of “Part I: Pre-Hispanic,” Porter classifies the “three race-groups” which formed early Mexican civilization as the Otomi, the Maya, and the Nahoa. The Otomi are quickly put aside as “their exact role in the history of primitive Mexico is so ill defined it would not be profitable to attempt even the most nebulous outline here” (143). However she goes on to read the other two groups as indicative of the period as a whole, and as one of spiritual and religious foundation for the Mexican nation. She writes, “The sculpture, the architecture, the decorations of the Nahaos and the Mayas are symbols of the racial mind, and that mind was, above all, religious” (UEP 145).

Similarly, Porter states that “In this study, the important fact to consider is a psychological one” (UEP 144); however, the rest of this passage details religious rites, the role of priests, and the principal deities. Her conflation of religiosity with psychology is an important one because it then springboards her into reading indigenous religious art as a window into their “character” and “mind.” Contrasting this is Porter’s own virulent anti-organized religion stance. She is quoted as saying church leaders are simply “‘God-intoxicated mystics and untidy saints with only a white blaze of divine love where their minds should have been’” (qtd. in Schwartz 262). Given this sentiment, it is no wonder that Porter prioritizes ancient conceptions of God as appropriate foundations for the “racial spirit” rather than the hierarchical and institutionalized forms of bureaucracy surrounding God in the Western world.

Further complicating her interpretation of the Natives with their religion is their art. In “Mexican Trinity” (1921), an essay that denounces the trinity of the Catholic Church, the oil monopolies, and land-holding hacienda bourgeoisie as power hungry and nearly despotic, she implies that it is through the crafts and arts where a revolution
happens in Mexico, because unlike the literary revolution of Russia, “the Indians cannot read [and so] what good would a literature of revolt do them?” (CEOW 401). It is through their art, then, that we not only see a vast and complex literacy communicate across centuries, but also a cultural literacy that becomes the bedrock for the revolution.

This conflation of religion, psychology and art leads Porter to her overarching thesis of the “racial spirit” of the Indian and her analysis of how this spirit is alive and flourishing in the Mexican national identity and, more so, driving the revolution. Porter believes that the ways in which this national racial-spirit survived colonization is through a kind of transculturalism where the Mexican spirit acculturated with the Spanish colonizers and conquered them – unbeknownst to the Spaniards, of course.

One of the primary ways that Porter continuously argues for the superiority and longevity of Native arts is through this sense of ancient acculturation, particularly with the Greeks and Romans, Asians, Egyptians and Aryans. Porter, rather than just attempting to make a parallel between these cultures’ ancestry and the Native culture, takes these parallels a step further and consistently argues that the Native culture is even more sustainable and enduring than their Western counterparts. She insists that despite similarities to other societies’ art, Native art “was, and remains, unique” (UEP 150). While Porter evidences this uniqueness in concrete ways – Natives use no crossed lines unlike the Greeks, and no rounded arches which were fundamental to Europe and the Orient (151) – what she is arguing in a subtle and ultimately more intricate way is that the Natives’ uniqueness comes in the form of their “racial spirit.”

All [Native arts and architecture] do veritably have a surface resemblance to the art creations of all races. But in their profound, racial significance they were spontaneous and original. In nothing more than their early arts
do they resolve themselves into a people whose developed psychology followed patterns unknown to both Europe and Asia. (UEP 152).

It is both the Native’s “profound racial significance” and their “developed psychology” which will lead us to see how a transcultural aesthetic of the Native is also a process of decolonization and reclamation.

In “Part II: Colonial Art” Porter begins with the significance of Nahoan decline and the advent of Spanish colonization. While Nahoan civilization peaked in the 1300s, and the Spaniards did not arrive until 1519 (UEP 152), Porter seems to draw conclusions of how these two cultures syncretized, and most significantly, how the Nahoa – and subsequently Mayas and Aztecs – flourished rather than became defeated by such contact.

Porter begins this section with musings on how we can begin to know an ancient people when the version of history we have been given thus far is through the eyes of the conquerors. Instead of any empirical or objective truth, “nearly all of the historians that followed accepted without question the Spanish point of view” and bestowed “their own half-developed culture” onto the pure-blood Mexicans through force of sword rather than any merit or earned decree (UEP 153). Porter’s argument seems to be going in the direction of a revolutionary deconstruction of historical truths, and what Linda Tuhiwai Smith would call a “decolonizing” of historical methodology; however, Porter practically recants at the last instant and falls prey to the ease of acquiescence like many historians before her, and that she attempted to repudiate just a moment before.

One steps from the half light of the centuries before the Conquest into the year 1519, and thereafter we have a record of events insufficient, fragmentary, but comparatively clear. However obscured with personal and religious and political motives, distorted occasionally with belief in
the miraculous, seen through the eyes of prejudices incomprehensible to us now, since we are bound by different prejudices, the story still has form and outline; it lends itself to the truth. (UEP 153-54.)

One immediately wonders, given the monstrous prejudices and malicious motives of the conquerors, what “truth” we are seeking from them exactly, or, maybe more importantly, what truth Porter sees in this history despite the fact that it is “distorted” and “incomprehensibly prejudiced.”

The truth we seek may be found in the art. Porter spends the rest of “Part II: Colonial Art” discussing the ways in which acculturation occurred between Spanish and Mexican-Native art and the lasting impact this had on modern Mexican culture and nationhood. She describes the colonization process as an unforgiving and brutal one – as it always is – “Mexico became New Spain, a nation torn from its old gods and inborn visions, thereafter to take on the forms of faith of the conqueror, the laws of an alien world, the customs of strangers” (UEP 154). Though this seems absolute and totalizing in its destruction, Porter does remind us in the same passage that “new arts were added to the old, and were amalgamated with them” (UEP 154). Porter sees this process – of surviving colonization and a century in general – as a revolution in itself. What is even more profound, however, is her recognition of the thriving indigenous art in all its adaptive and progressive forms; it is a truly transcultural aesthetic.

Porter argues for two realities present simultaneously in Native art: a unique racial ideology and an expression of form that is transcultural in its understanding and expression.

The characteristic Mexican faculty to imitation of design and method, combined with an entirely alien feeling for color and execution brought about a subtle shifting of surface expression. His ability to adapt and use strange forms,
under curious conditions, was the foundation for his new art, destined to become racial and genuinely expressive.

The primary use of his imitative faculty was commercial. The native, out of his soul’s necessity, made his wares first things of beauty. But he must also use them, and sell them. They must be beautiful and useful objects, not costly, for the use of an impoverished people. (*UEP* 156).

First, imitation is not a mimetic quality meant to ensure survival, but one that allows the Native artist to utilize his own techniques along with the colonizers in order to further his own artistic understanding. Second, though Porter calls this colonization a “curious condition” (which has unfortunate echoes of the genocide of U.S. slavery being called a “peculiar institution”) we see again her reassertion that this expression is racial in the most positive of ways. Porter, in her attempt to downplay the psychological trauma and irreversible cultural damage that colonization causes, looks instead to see how the Native has adapted and utilized, benefited even, from foreign contact.

Commercialization becomes even more intimately addressed, than was referenced in the Acknowledgement, when Porter states that “the native brings his goods to sell them to his own people. They are personal authentic creations, by the peasant craftsman of a race that expresses itself simply and inevitably in terms of beauty” (139). Authenticity is then mediated through its market value in the local context alone. Though Porter’s exhibit is an attempt to globalize Mexican art by showing it in the U.S., the fact that it is bought and sold – negotiated – in its own context, by its own people, is what gives it “real” value. The irony of course is that Westerners then buy the art at a hugely inflated price because that is *their* perspective of worth – the higher the market value the more “valuable” it becomes – and are willing to do so, they desire such ownership, precisely because the art was not intended for them at all.
On a note of social commentary more explicit than sentimentalized, Porter notes that the trade of products during colonization included not just merchandise but ideas as well (*UEP* 158). To illustrate this she mentions a lacquer technique imported from China and used in Mexico; however, she goes further and mentions that the pottery of Puebla was just beginning to gain recognition as the town was newly formed in 1531. She states simply that “the first Potter’s Guild in New Spain was chartered [in Puebla]: an organization of pure Indian and Spanish craftsman, with a strict clause declaring that no negro or person of mixed blood could be a member. Puebla Talavera ware was during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a synonym for excellent pottery” (*UEP* 158). Stated simply and with no analysis, Porter boldly recognizes the importation of the ideas of hierarchy and prejudicial race-based systems of exclusion as a social monitoring system including reward and punishment, but backs quickly and cautiously away from delving into any social commentary on the topic.

To further create an invisible accountability, the illustrations accompanying this passage are of two separate scenes, posed yet vacant of life. The top photograph is of four empty chairs staged in a line, directly facing the camera, the third chair in the line is a child’s size and awkwardly smaller than the other three. It is simply titled, “Decorated Chairs – City of Aguascalientes.” The photograph below is of two chairs and a loveseat in-between, made of a kind of rattan weave. Here again, the empty chairs face the camera, the third one in this shot slightly askew and facing the settee in the middle of the shot – as if just before the photo was snapped, someone bumped into and forgot to push it back in place. The emptiness of the chairs, the vacancy of the scene, the anonymity of the houses barely hinted at in the background, all speak to the lack of the artist as primary to
the process, and of how these pieces of furniture insert themselves as either art or utilitarian pieces in the lives of the owners and the individuals of the society, let alone the unnamed and invisible craftsmen who made them. It serves to echo, most hauntingly, the racial dynamics of the society when we re-hear Porter say that “no negroes or persons of mixed blood” can be in the guilds of Puebla, and we look to the right and view empty chairs with no artists to claim what is theirs; “anonymous” in this case probably being a Native or a woman artist.

Porter notes a few passages later that “The Mexican absorbed everything, and grew slowly away from their teachers. The transition in this particular instance was slow. Almost two hundred years elapsed before the Puebla ware became a completely Mexican thing” (UEP 160). Given the previous passages, this bit seems almost apologetic; an acknowledgment that time slowly heals the wounds of colonialism. She quickly puts her deference aside, as in the next passage Porter makes a bold assertion of Native brilliance and quickness, and uses the example of architecture to showcase Native decolonization practices. She begins: “The imported forms of architecture became, in the hands of the Mexicans, a separate creation” (UEP 160). When she continues, Porter aligns certain artistic attributes along bloodlines, noting the importance of where one was born or the strength of one’s national allegiance as compared to the longevity of one’s ancestry along bloodlines going back to the Aztecs. She continues:

The early churches of Mexico are full of this Aztec strength and heaviness. Even roses and Cupids and emasculated saints become virile and significant – they are not the roses and saints and Cupids of Spain. Later, the Mexican-born Spaniards who designed in all the arts, guided by some vague tradition of classical proportion, produced merely another Barroco style, coincidental with similar decadence in the old country. But whereas in Europe two white and civilized forms merged and decayed, in Mexico the fusion was
Spanish and Indian: and Mexican Barroco, “the Churrigueresco,” amazingly genuine and alive, is the curious result. (UEP 160).

The bloodlines of the artists merge and bleed together on the very particular and apparently necessary Mexican soil, breeding art that transcends “decayed” European and “white art.” This stillborn Western art drops to the ground at the very feet of the Mestizo “fusion” art – “amazingly genuine and alive” – to birth again and again on its own the modern Mexican nation.

Lest we forget, though, that in this co-mingling the Native needs to remain superior to the Spaniard, Porter will forcefully remind us. Further, she will decolonize the colonizer by stripping him from his class-bound castle and his assumed but not earned airs of superiority.

The only vivid and quick artistic impulse of this country grew in the soul of the native. The Spanish artist who maintained the foreign tradition painted merely after the style of his own country, imitating without adapting, lacking inspiration of his own, growing each generation farther away from his sources, until at the close of the eighteenth century the so-called aristocratic art was a puerile childish copy of the European seventeenth century manner.

Aside from this academic school, however, a national spirit was developing among the Mexican-born Spaniards, and a tremendously increasing class of Spanish-Indios who were genuinely Mexican in feeling. During later Colonial times, they called themselves Mexicans and followed native customs as a patriotic duty. (UEP 161-2).

This passage draws our attention to how Porter conceives of the failed processes of colonization; in particular, it is the foreigners who came, namely the Spaniards, keeping their own traditions and not acculturating to the Mexican culture they were attempting to eradicate through domination and colonization. The colonizer’s stale traditions of the old country then remain a culture that is nothing but an incestuous relationship of aristocrats creating a “puerile” copy of a copy throughout the centuries. The Native, counter to this
moldy accumulation of artistic in-breeding, creates his own “class” of nationalism through racial- and national- intermixing which in turn births an entirely new nation and art. This “class of nationalism” rests entirely on being a non-“aristocratic art” and being instead a “national spirit.” The tie between socioeconomics and aesthetics is inextricable. Further, this feeling of manifesting a national art based solely on the Native is so intense, so ingrained in the collective consciousness that to create such art becomes a “patriotic duty.” Porter takes her most revolutionary leap here, suggesting that modern Mexican nationalism, then, is only defined by the “soul of the native” and his artistic expression.

Throughout Outline Porter employs very specific word choices to express her understanding of the Spanish relationship to the Native and Mexican of the era, and it is striking in its severity. She begins by stating that the 1810 Independence of Mexico from Spain created a shift in the “national psychology” which led to a regression of all Mexicans to imitate all things European. Yet she goes to severely judge this shift by stating the aristocrat “degenerated” back to his European manner – a manner that was “mostly second rate French” – and representative of the “decadence of Greece” (UEP 163). This sloth-like backsliding on the part of the conquered Spanish and the newly independent Mexicans had a causal relationship, in her mind, to the temporary disappearance of Mexican art. In explanation of why the Native was silenced under this self-indulgent European revival of Mexico’s post-independence, she states that “During these changes, political and social, the native has remained racially and spiritually static [because] in common with all peasantry, he derived his ideas from the fine arts – not only from imported and foreign arts, but from his own magnificent traditions, [and] filtered them through his own understanding, translated them into his common speech: the result
is a thing of superb beauty and strength” (*UEP* 163). In this passage we can see, in its entirety, Porter’s argument and rationalization of the means and ends of colonization and acculturation, as well as her understanding of how a transcultural aesthetic speaks to the building of nationhood.

Porter states that the Native remained true to his own culture and aesthetic despite any attempts of this transcultural process to turn into an artistic form of colonization and complete domination. By staying with his own traditions and understandings, the “peasant” keeps his own “common speech” of artistic expression to continue the communication of his culture. She ends by saying that the Native “grew each generation a step further away from the object he imitated – like the Mexican-born Spaniard who copied methods of Spain – but with this difference, that the native added always more and more of his own feeling and psychic reaction, until at once the thing was his own, an interpretation of beauty, national, personal – even more, absolutely individual” (*UEP* 163). Porter believes that the individual is as powerful as the nation in creating and sustaining a Mexican identity and aesthetic. Epstein would support this when he writes: “Though transculture depends on the efforts of separate individuals to overcome their identification with separate cultures, on another level, it is a process of interaction between cultures themselves in which more and more individuals have found themselves ‘outside’ of any particular culture” (298). It is the interplay of not only cultures meeting and communicating in “contact zones” but also the individuals interplay of artistic styles and genres – their art that embodies their “psychic reaction” – and continues a centuries long dialogue with their “racial spirit.” This lineage is what leads us
to the present day and how the modern Mexican artist can similarly embody this ancient, intimate, and transnational conversation.

Porter begins “Part III: The Present” by stating that there exists no bibliography of Mexican art and that there are no essays “either on the history or meaning of this vivid and natural expression of a race.” She states that the few writings in existence are “casual chapters…that never reach general circulation” (UEP 163). Her primary intention is not to establish Outline as a definitive authority or become yet another essay in the “academic tradition,” of the dominant Western and European schools of thought but rather to say that Mexican art should be opened up to the general public, and established as a fine art, an intellectual aesthetic, for the class conscious and collective masses (163).

She writes that academics and other essayists “whose ideals and techniques were formed by the Spanish or Italian, or worst of all, the French schools” inevitably “maintain, almost to the man, that Mexican art began well under the foreign influences, but that it is now degenerated into a mere meaningless peasant art” (UEP 163-4). Porter also takes to task the Mexican artists and critics that control the display and distribution of Mexican art, who, despite their socialist leanings and liberal leanings, have no intention of allowing “peasant art” to represent their nation internationally. It is in this fledgling moment that Porter begins to establish a class aesthetic as well as push for the ethnic-national identity of Mexico to be solidly grounded in a working-class artistic vision.

Porter argues that rather than be “reduced” by the terminology and semantics of “peasant art” we should revel in the term and see it for all it’s worth. She writes:

A peasant art: this is precisely what it is, what it should be. The alien, aristocratic influence was a catastrophe that threatened the vitals of the Mexican race, and diverted its natural expression to strange, superficial
methods over a long period. Yet, once released, and only a little maimed, it settled back to its calm level and persisted in its own way.” (UEP 164).

Porter’s larger argument of *Outline* begins to come full-circle here as she articulates her final premise: the indigenous element persists because a very purposeful transculturalization has occurred in spite of colonization, and this is large part realized because of the class-based context. Porter goes on to write:

> It is not possible successfully to comprehend Mexican art from any other angle [than a peasant art]. Seen thus, harmoniously adjusted to its native background and its history, we discover it to be an invaluable, eloquent thing. There is in it an earthy aroma of a frankly peasant effluvium. It is filled with a rude and healthy vigor, renewing itself from *its own sources*. Above all, there is no self-consciousness, no sophisticated striving after simplicity. The artists are one with a people simple as nature is simple: that is to say, direct and savage, beautiful and terrible, full of harshness and love, divinely gentle, appallingly honest. (UEP 165; emphasis added).

The class aesthetic that Porter declares in essence a “peasant art” is possible because it “renews itself from its own sources.” This sense of sovereignty and empowerment is not only a class-based foundation for the art, but also a transculturalism. The Native has drawn from other sources, foreign influences, and survived colonization practices because his renewal rests in continual return to his own ancient cultural lineage, essence, “spirit.” His “peasant art” then is not only a revolutionary act in the face of extreme cultural imperialism, it is also an act of decolonization. As Kathie Irwin writes of Native decolonization practices, “’We don’t need anyone else developing the tools which will help us to come to terms with who we are. We can and will do this work. Real power lies with those who design the tools – it always has. This power is ours’” (qtd. in Tuhiwai Smith 38). Art, here, is the tool where real power lies; the artist’s tools doing a laboring *and* creative act.
Porter persuasively argues that we must consider and “read” Mexico from this decolonized vantage point and that to do otherwise imposes a false perspective and would therefore leave us with the empty hands of a false understanding and false history of contemporary Mexico. She writes that “we must consider the Mexican arts and crafts as they are, having outworn or assimilated their foreign influences. If they seem a trifle endangered by modern contacts, however remote these may be, let us keep in mind that they have always been, not only a record of the racial unfoldment, but a personal diary, if you will, of the craftsman himself” (*UEP* 165). Here Porter sees that we must resist the urge to re-colonize the Mexican nation with our Western and Modern perspectives because to do so would lead to a modern cultural-colonizing of Mexican art and its peoples.

Porter uses the example of particular artistic objects in order to witness both the “contact zone” and the consequences this has had on the Native Mexican. First she describes a Mexican picture of the Spaniards with their “stiff waisted ladies with monstrous coiffures, [and] those imported dogs and incredible household furnishings. Painted chests and wooden trays of that period silently point to the ugliness of our kind of civilization as beheld by the civilized of another race and ethical code” (*UEP* 166). In her decolonizing Porter shifts the gaze of a Westerner critiquing Mexican crafts, to the Native’s gaze and its attendant “ethical code” to view and see the “ugliness of our kind of civilization.” It is not a sentimentalized re-posturing; her decolonization process, and hopefully ours, is a wholly complete shift in consciousness and perspective.

To illustrate how this process is made manifest most clearly in the art work itself, Porter describes a two-sided ceramic pot from Tonala. She writes that one side of the pot
was “covered with figures done in that old style – ancient Mexican hunters drawing their bows against fantastic animals” (UEP 166). However, the other side witnesses the contact zone and the art which inevitably speaks what the Native population might not otherwise be allowed to describe. Porter states that other side of the pot is “even more interesting, for it bore the detailed drawing of an automobile, of outmoded fashion, brimming with men wearing foreign hats, hastening down the streets of a Oaxaca village – the potter’s own village, no doubt, and this a first impression of the only automobile he had ever seen. Viewed through his amazed eyes, it is more mad and strange than all his warriors and animals and forests” (UEP 167). While Porter exposes a moment of the “contact zone” wherein the Native is confronted with unknown machinery, she does not allow this moment to infantilize or essentialize the Native. She continues,

No doubt most of us would think [the two-sided pot] in lamentable taste. It warns us, too, that if the artist were removed from his fructifying contact with his mother earth, condemned daily to touch instead the mechanics and artifices of modern progress, he might succumb, as do the aristocratic arts, each in turn, to the overwhelming forces of a world turned dizzyingly by a machine. But where the civilized arts, so-called, may root themselves in another imported and cultivated soil, where the individual artist may triumph by the strength of his unique genius, the peasant workman may have none of these resources. In his own earth – his native tradition, are his strength and his happiness. (UEP 167).

This, then, is the essence of what Porter means by the “racial spirit.” It is not necessarily the essentializing force that it seems at first blush, but instead, a decolonizing of Native arts against the forces of Western cultural imperialism. She is not simply juxtaposing earth over machine, pagan over Christian, Native over White; she is actually exposing the contact zone, and detailing how the arts of the Native are realizing themselves through his “peasant” context and through the strength of his cultural connectivity, his “racial spirit”.

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Porter goes further by connecting this racialized spirit to belonging – a force completely counter to Western and modern conceptions of individualism, ownership, and singular artistic genius, focusing instead on community and shared knowledges. *Mi Tierra*, my earth, Porter writes, is the place a Mexican was born, where he was raised, where he belongs (*UEP* 167). *Mi Tierra* is his beloved, and so to this home he must “return inevitably, no matter how far he goes away, nor how long he must stay in foreign places” (168). The Native identity then is centered completely in the land, Porter asserts, and further, this then informs his art. Yet Linda Tuhiwai Smith does not let us so succumb to pantheist fantasy so easily:

> I believe our survival as [indigenous] peoples has come from our knowledge of our contexts, our environment, not from some active beneficence of our Earth Mother. We had to know to survive. We had to work out ways of knowing, we had to predict, to learn and reflect, we had to preserve and protect, we had to defend and attack, we had to be mobile, we had to have social systems which enabled us to do these things. We still have to do these things. (12-13).

While Porter sees an organic connection between the land of belonging and Native arts, Tuhiwai Smith’s reminder of the deeply active participation in such connectivity, brings us back to the Mexican revolution where both instances – organic emotion and active engagement – are being used to establish a modern Mexican nation. Claudio Lomnitz in *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* argues that while some characteristics of pre-Hispanic culture do persist contemporarily, albeit in a transformed state, that “traditional Mexican nationalism, which always saw the grandeur of the Aztec city as the founding moment of Mexican nationality,” did so based on an ideology of kinship, territory, cultural formations of hierarchy, and communitarian goods (37). While Porter acknowledges the craftsmanship of the Native artist, she still believes that the
“peasant workman” has “no resources” other than his “own earth.” As Tuhiwai and Lomnitz have proven, this connection to the earth is also a powerful and utilitarian system of shared resources and strategies. It is a system that builds societies and conquers colonizers.

Porter, too, recognizes the power inherent in such societal structures and communal networks. She sees this primarily functioning through the exchange of crafts and art. It is solely this sense of community and cultural belonging that informs the artists’ crafts and simultaneously creates an individual aesthetic as well as a regionalist context, and persists in sustaining the local economy in these working-class communities rather than simply maintaining a position in the global marketplace. “In this village where he was born, the Mexican sits with his family and his neighbors, making household wares for himself and for the nearby markets…[which in turn allows] each community [to have] its own particular craft” (UEP 168). This recognition of regionalist crafts is a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it acknowledges that each community has its own aesthetic indicative of its region and culture. On the other hand, it sometimes fetishizes the arts and crafts of a region and essentializes that community to its commodity value. Tuhiwai Smith writes: “While being on the margin of the world has had dire consequences, being incorporated into the marketplace has different implications and in turn requires the mounting of new forms of resistance” (24).

Porter continues this fetishization of Native arts when she establishes that the crafts speak to both the regionalist context of the art, and the universalist “racial spirit” that informs it. She writes: “Weaving and ceramics, wood carving and embroidery, these natural crafts of the peasant, are now the most perfectly developed and eloquent of the
Mexican arts. There are many variations of method and style, depending on the climate, the characteristic woods or clays of the regions, the conditions of life of the workers; while the ultimate decisive factors are the special social customs and needs of each tribe” (UEP 170). It is an individual effort in a collective environment, done for artistic expression and pragmatic results.

When Porter goes on to say that despite the regionalist variations, all Mexican craftsmen “share ideas, intuitions and human habits; they understand each other” we begin to see how she does indeed separate them from the ancient Greeks and sophisticated Egyptians she had early made comparisons to (170). There is for the Native artist, however, no individual genius, no divine skill, there are only earth-bound laborers in a collective, racialized effort of craftsmanship. While many of the artists, the Muralists in particular, conceived of themselves in similar terms, it is impossible to avoid commenting on the reductive essentialism that this stance of “unity” requires. In order for the potter to market herself as an authentic peasant craftsman of Puebla pottery, she must necessarily commit herself to a performance of that identity, to that marketplace, to that class status, and to the commodification of her work based on those factors. It is, then, an exchange of a romanticized identity and an essentialized locale, in space and body.

To that end, Porter spends the last pages of Outline elucidating the major regions of the country and their unique crafts, in part fulfilling the Westerner’s fantasy of Mexican regionalism and in part attempting to elevate Mexican regional art from low/craft art to high/authentic art worthy of her transnational exhibit. For instance, she writes that the classic serape of the Mexican Indio is likened to “woven music” (172).
There is the pottery of Guadalajara that has “all the faults, the imperfections, the unevenness of the handiwork of a human being who is ‘untaught in our own sense’ – but it has the priceless value of the human sentiment, a loved thing created for its own sake” (175). We cannot help but visualize the “Holland blue-and-white” pottery from Puebla, the “sulfur yellow” bookshelves from Aguascalientes and the “ashy violet, gray, and rose” rebosos from the Yucatan (175; 177; 179). All of which, Porter says, aspires “after a perfect realism, a complete statement of the thing they see, is the essence of their arts, the key to the racial temperament” (178).

This conception of the modern Mexican artist is akin to the pre-Hispanic descriptions of the first chapter, one where the designs of the ancient peoples “existed as the simple universal expressions of emotions and perceptions that animated the awakening soul of man, the natural idiom of primary understanding” – an understanding that was dictated by their context alone because “the individual use of these perceptions were developed differently by the growth of human personality limited and directed by its environment” (UEP 170). This kind of earth-bound, universal understanding of a peoples – pre-Hispanic to Modern – as the same kind of being, with the same universal drive to create but with specific regionalist perspectives, is Porter’s way of arguing for a lineage, an ancient bloodline of natural aesthetic and artistic ability that is directly counter to the modern world, machinery, and the loss of context and belonging.

In her succinct and almost abrupt conclusion, Porter writes that there has been much left unwritten; the history of Mexican popular arts being too prodigious and complex to cover in fifty short pages. But, she says, we can use Outline as an introduction to such a vast topic, as her intention “is to present to you, in its human
aspects, this profound and touching expression of a very old race, surviving and persisting in its devotion to ancient laws with a steadfastness that is an anachronism in this fluctuating age” (UEP 187). She recognizes that the people viewing this exhibit may be seeing Mexican arts and crafts for the first time, and, in so introducing such a spectacle of craftsmanship covering over fifteen centuries, hopes to give a radically new and transformative context and foothold for the Western gaze.

In one of her few discussions about the traveling Mexican arts exhibit, Porter was interviewed by Hank Lopez, Director of the Inter-American Cultural Institute, in Mexico City 1965. She says that the exhibit, once compiled and completed in Mexico, could not get any gallery space or press, or even entrance into, the United States. She says: “I tried the Corcoran in Washington, the Anderson in New York, and in St. Louis and Chicago, and in all cases they wouldn’t let us have the gallery – because the political pressure had been put on. The U.S. government did not allow the show to come into the country because it was “political propaganda” and the government hadn’t recognized Obregon’s government” (qtd. in Lopez 126). Eventually, somebody called Porter and suggested they bring the 80,000 pieces of ancient and modern art to California, that maybe they’d find more interest and openness there. Porter says that once the art got to California, “they kept us on a siding for nearly two months. We tried everything in the world. But you know you can’t fight international politics, at least we couldn’t. So there was a dealer who came and said that he would buy the whole show” (qtd. in Lopez 126). Incredibly enough, the Los Angeles art dealer, as yet still unidentified, bought all 80,000 pieces. The heartbreaking conclusion that ensued was that he sold it all.
Porter describes the scene: “‘We had this great show that made the most enormous hit. All the tremendous interest in Mexican art in the United States stemmed from that. People poured into that place from all over the country and they bought these beautiful things. It was scattered all over the world. And so we were all in simple despair. I just threw up my hands and quit’ (qtd. in Lopez 126). Porter and others spent countless years attempting to re-organize the exhibit. She continues by describing her emotions around getting the individual pieces back into its cohesive whole. “Xavier Guerrero, Covarrubbias, Best-Maugard, Tito Turnbull the photographer (the working team), we were all separated and scattered by that time, off in different places, trying to salvage the pieces. All of us really heartbroken. Honestly we were emotional” (qtd. in Lopez 126).

Much later on, in 1952, everybody on the original committee – except Porter: “They hadn’t invited me again because I had gone into such a rampage the first time” (127) – reconvened the exhibit with what artifacts and objects they had recovered exactly 30 years after the original exhibit. Porter says that she initially refused to go see the “new” and revised exhibit saying, “‘I was still as bitter as gall that politicians could have been allowed to do so much destruction, so much damage; that internal politics, and oil and finance could ruin art…was just to me horrible’” (127). But see it she did; and it was simply marvelous. Added to this new exhibit were recently discovered artifacts and relics from the pre-Columbian era. While Porter had conflicting feelings over what she considered the political denigration and soiling of the exhibit, she also still felt deeply connected to the art itself. Still, too, she felt connected to the land and the nation of Mexico, to the promise of the country, despite the “failure” of the revolution and the corruption of both the political and artistic machines. As Laura says in “Flowering
Judas,” “Uninvited she has promised herself to this place; she can no longer imagine herself as living in another country, and there is no pleasure in remembering her life before she came here” (CS 93).

Porter maintains that redemption for Mexico is in the hands of the artists. In “Where Presidents Have No Friends” (1922), Porter writes:

[the artists] are all convinced, quite simply, that twelve millions of their fifteen millions of peoples cannot live in poverty, illiteracy, a most complete spiritual and mental darkness, without constituting a disgraceful menace to the state. They have a civilized conviction that the laborer is worthy of his hire, a practical perception of the waste entailed in millions of acres of untitled land while the working people go hungry. And with this belief goes an esthetic appreciation of the necessity of beauty in the national life, the cultivation of racial forms of art, and the creation of substantial and lasting unity in national politics. (CEOW 415).

This passage neatly summarizes Porter’s overall argument of Outline and seamlessly connects all major premises of her underlying intentions: the working classes cannot be left in poverty while they are also being upheld as the spiritual center of the modern Mexican nation; furthermore, that while the new and modern Mexican nation was supposed to be built upon the romanticization of the Native “race,” Porter’s insistence on the Native “racial temperament” is actually counter to how the nationalistic fervor attempted to inscribe it. Porter wanted to herald – for all the sentimentalizing this might entail – a spirituality and an almost divine will into Native crafts and art that would further the revolution. She did not want to reinscribe colonization practices. What is left to recognize is whether or not Porter accomplished her intentions, namely to further an artistic and indigenous revolution separate from the politicizing, romanticizing, and self-aggrandizing of the Muralists and the government, she did indeed bring to the forefront an otherwise invisible, working-class art form – a “living art.”
Anita Brenner embodies what a transnational identity promises: she is a Mexican-born woman of Jewish lineage, educated in the United States’ Ivy League world, earning a PhD from Columbia University (without a Bachelor’s or Master’s degree) under the guidance of famed anthropologist Franz Boas, and realizing adulthood in the metropolitan chaos of New York and Mexico Cities during their most revolutionary decades. As a journalist and correspondent for *The New York Times* and *The Nation*, she traveled all of Europe. Yet Mexico was home, and this was witnessed most clearly by the fact that the Mexican government tried to bestow the Aztec Eagle upon her – the highest honor granted by the Mexican government to foreigners – which she promptly refused, on the grounds that she was Mexican by birth (Glusker 11). Despite the fact that Brenner was of the *intelligentsia*, a very accomplished woman, and a world traveler, she still felt adrift, as evidenced by her 1929 poem that voiced she was the “Daughter of two countries, citizen of none” (Glusker 56).

Anita’s family was originally from Latvia, and they became part of the Jewish diaspora that landed many emigrants in Mexico. Anita was born in Aguascalientes, Mexico in 1905, where she was raised until the age of eleven. Susannah Glusker, Anita’s daughter, writes in *A Mind of Her Own*: “Born shortly after the revolution began, she witnessed the armed struggle, the dead and wounded, as well as efforts to reconcile differences. She had firsthand experience as a refugee and displaced person” (12). Her official displacement occurred when the government advised that foreigners leave the country. The Brenners left and returned multiple times during the revolution, yet, after auctioning off all their belongings, they left for a third time never to return (26). When Anita and her family (consisting now of three other siblings) moved to San Antonio,
Texas, Anita was confronted with an ethnic and regional identity crisis that would haunt her sense of self for many years to follow. The other girls at the Texas school would ask “What are you?” and she was often referred to as either “the little Mexican girl” or “the little Jewish girl” – neither of which were tenable identities in 1920s Texas (Glusker 28).

During her tenure at multiple colleges, Anita began to write an autobiographical novel to reconcile her fragile sense of self. This unpublished novel included a particularly weighted and symbolic scene: Anita arrives alone at a séance where she sees a group of people communicating with spirits. One spirit sees her pain and whispers to her: “You do not believe, and your pain is greater because you have no faith. Your heart is rebellious, and you set your own spirit as the only reality…But you shall go to a strange land, and there many men will want you, and you shall see many things that only lofty spirits know…Through your hand you will tell to the world many radiant things, for you have the gift and need only your faith” (qtd. in Glusker 31). That day Anita packed her bags and at the age of eighteen, moved back to Mexico by herself.

Witnessing to the fact that she made the right decision, Anita wrote to a friend from Texas in 1923 extolling the virtues of post-revolutionary Mexico and voicing her sense of belonging:

‘…Artists, sculptors, writers, socialists, musicians, poets – intelligentsia, but not the imitation of it that we have, Jerry….They all speak the same language, that is, they all understand each other, whether they approve or not…Of course I bask in it…No snobbishness, prejudice, of any sort – racial, monetary…As to racial, there couldn’t be. There are too many shades of skin and flag represented…But it is so real, so easy, so unconstrained and not at all hectic, that I feel like lifting wings, putting my typewriter under my arm and going to heaven or to some quieter place to achieve a masterpiece.’ (qtd. In Glusker 34).
And this is exactly what Anita did. *Idols behind Altars: The Story of the Mexican Spirit* was written between 1925 and 1927, to be published in 1929, with illustrations by Edward Weston and Tina Modotti. It is clearly written from this space of inspiration and connectivity, and the result is a text that is quite intricate and inclusive, much like Anita herself.

*Idols behind Altars* was originally conceived as two separate articles; one a catalogue of Mexican decorative arts, and the other a comprehensive story about the role of art in the Mexican Revolution. Anita, and French painter Jean Charlot, who worked intimately with Anita on the ideas and writing for both articles, quite consciously employed the term “renascence”\(^3\) to discuss both projects with the intention that this spelling “reaffirmed the identification of Mexico as a place of religion and revolutions with the concept of rebirth, as if it were a messianic endeavor to undergo rebirth” (Glusker 89). This idea of a spiritual and artistic rebirth fueled both the writing projects, the authors’ connection to Mexican history and its peoples, and their own personal journeys.

While writing the articles, Brenner was in constant contact with Edward Weston, providing him with lists of objects and images he and Tina Modotti should photograph, and the contracted list ended up totaling over 400 images (Glusker 90)\(^4\). However ambitious such an endeavor seemed, once the articles were pitched to stateside publishers, Brenner was informed that such writings about Mexico were “not

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\(^3\) “Mexican Renascence” was also the title for an article Brenner and Charlot published together, as well as the original title for *Idols*.

\(^4\) For more on the role of Tina Modotti and Edward Weston in *Idols* see Elissa J. Rashkin “*Idols behind Altars*: Art, Authorship, and Authority in the Mexican Cultural Renaissance.”
commercial” and the cost of reprinting photographs was too expensive (Glusker 90). Brenner was therefore forced to combine both manuscripts into one book, *Idols behind Altars: The Story of the Mexican Spirit*, and included only 115 images.

The overall text of *Idols* reads like a cross between an historical document, a theoretical argument, and an art criticism roundtable discussion. Anita herself wrote in her diary in 1927, “‘I have declared to both Jean and Lucy my discovery that my book is not art criticism nor history, but really anthropology. From geography through culture, traditions, folklore, interinfluences, convergence, divergence, and all these things in individual cases’” (qtd. in Azuela 157). Brenner’s idea of “interinfluences” parallels transculturalism, as does the idea that as an anthropologist she is attempting to speak about both goddesses as well as national governments to a variety of audiences.

Susannah Glusker writes that *Idols* was meant to be non-academic and this “hypothesis was woven into the text without identifying any methodology. The book was a product of her journalistic activity, as opposed to her current academic world of anthropology” (Glusker 89). In what may be read as indicative of a working-class consciousness, Brenner wanted her text to be readable and accessible. That being said, *Idols* can in fact be quite dense, intellectual, and at times overwhelming to read. Ernest Gruening reviewed the book for *The Nation* in 1925 and said it was quite complex and difficult for amateurs (qtd. in Glusker 106). Yet Katherine Anne Porter wrote in her 1929 review of *Idols* that it is a vastly comprehensive book, and therefore must be overwhelming, in the most positive of ways:

> The anthropologist, the explorer, the teacher, the artist, the folk-heroes, the makers of legend and miracle have joined in pouring out their
riches to make this a communal work, like everything that comes out of Mexico….the attempt to present reality is a brave one, but there is a portentous air of legend in the style, and in spite of herself the author writes in heightened mood of one enchanted and convinced by a miracle. (Porter “Old Gods and New Messiahs” 83).

The work then is much like the country, overwhelming and miraculous.

Elissa Rashkin writes about the overall style and format of the book: “Some parts are openly autobiographical while others rely on sources that she as often as not leaves unidentified. The work as a whole transcends generic boundaries, moving fluidly between historical reportage, anthropological observation, philosophical speculation, art criticism, and storytelling” (43). This mix of narrative conventions and interdisciplinary perspectives may account for the lack of receptivity in both the art and academic worlds. While the book itself was well received by “reviewers, intellectuals, collaborators, and the press” it was far from a best-seller. This may also be due to the fact that it was published in the year of the Crash (Glusker 104). That being said, Idols was intended for a Western audience. Brenner wanted foreign readers to release the mythologized and often racist stereotypes they held about Mexico and its peoples. In particular, Brenner believed that it was through art that readers (and viewers) could best re-negotiate these preconceived notions. Glusker writes: “Art, for Anita, was the key to understanding Mexico, its people, customs, and frivolities. It was the door that opened the eyes of foreign readers to a view of the country without prejudice. When she reviewed an exhibit, she did not compare schools or styles at different periods. On the contrary, she shunned the use of ‘isms’” (Glusker 88). Because Brenner was quite aware of and sensitive to prevailing prejudices, we can also read undercurrents of confrontation and argument parallel to its historical and illustrative timeline.
Like Porter, Brenner formatted her book through historical and thematic approaches, namely, the pre-Spanish, the colonial, and the revolutionary periods. Also like Porter, Brenner establishes the influences of European art, but consistently argues for the ways that Native arts supersede and surpass European designs and creativity. Porter and Brenner both argue for a distinctly transcultural perspective which shows how Christianized images were acculturated rather than assimilated into Native artistic practices, thereby not only surviving colonization but thriving past cultural imperialism. With this premise intact, both authors then argue vehemently for the _indigenismo_ principles of the Mexican Revolution by showcasing Native arts as embodying the promise of a modern nationalism and a new Mexican identity.

The overall layout of _Idols_ is the Introduction, written for and published in the 1970 reprint; Part One is an historical overview of pre-colonial history and art; Part Two discusses the acculturation of indigenous populations, as seen in their art and ways of being; and Part Three, containing short essays on individual modern artists, mostly muralists, and artistic-based, philosophical discussions about the era. The general thesis of _Idols_ is Anita’s philosophical belief that a revolution of a people and a country must be _created_ – like art – and that this happens not from looking outward to other nations’ bureaucratic systems or artistic preferences, but from looking inward to one’s deeper, ancient self. It is a political and psychological transformation that is evidenced by the visual manifestation of the arts. Glusker writes, “Anita was not satisfied with descriptive narratives that did not carry a political message. Artists and intellectuals active at the time
felt they were engaged in a revolutionary process, identifying the development of Mexico’s history and its art as one” (90).

Given the weight of this intention, *Idols behind Altars* is a vast and comprehensive text both poetic and scientific. My intention in exploring this text, while keeping in mind Porter’s *Outline of Popular Mexican Arts and Craft*, is to see how Brenner’s anthropological perspective illuminates a concrete and sociological vision of Mexican arts and their impact on the revolutionary era. As well, in exploring these arts from their historical, cultural, and transcultural perspective, I hope to see how Brenner’s depiction of folkloric objects, particularly the ex-voto and *pulquería* murals, show us how representations of the Real and the spiritual in artistic practices is a phenomenon unique to the “renascence” of constructing a Mexican national identity. Informing all of this are Anita’s unique perspectives: her working-class consciousness and transnational background, and her belief in de-colonization, especially as she sees all of these as essential ingredients for a revolution and individual transformation.

Like Modotti and Porter, Brenner comes from a working-class background that includes specific, imbedded beliefs about labor and gender, which consistently inform their work. For Brenner, “She came from a family of working women. Paula Brenner, her mother, worked as a seamstress in the sweatshops of Chicago. Anita did not question working to earn a living or to build a professional career” (Glusker 62). This also created a certain openness and understanding when she approached her working subjects or viewed art that was otherwise labeled as “folk,” “working-class” or “domestic.” We can also see corollaries in terms of gender; Anita wrote in her journal in 1929 that she “recognizes sex as a key to things, and the plane upon which women’s position is placed
– and should be. Since it is creative energy, it is for her to direct” (Glusker 67). Gender, like work, is a kind of labor.

Brenner believed that in this fluidity of “isms” an individual was more powerful than their circumstances or attributes, but that even more, one must adapt and transform in order to survive with any grace or clarity. Transculturalism, as originating from Jose Marti’s “Nuestra America” (1891) argues that one “must know the elements that make up his own country, and how to bring them together, using methods and institutions originating within the country, to reach that desirable state where each man can attain self-realization” (Marti 122). And this is precisely what Anita hoped to do with her text: expose the ways that Native Mexicans, through “a process of adaptation and syncretism, of cultural survival, assimilation, and resistance,” have come into a process of self-realization and national identity (Rashkin 43). It is her individual process, it is the process of Mexico.

What makes Anita Brenner unique to her circumstances and her era is that she did not stop at recognizing cultural survival as necessarily transformative, but that she went a step further, promoting what I would call a decolonization. Linda Tuhiwai Smith states that “Decolonization is a process which engages with imperialism and colonialism at multiple levels. For researchers, one of those levels is concerned with having a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values which inform research practices” (20). Many decades before post-colonialist theory even existed, Anita Brenner used her anthropological and research training to create a critical lens through which to explore the colonization practices of the Spanish and the United States, and to see the ways that the indigenous populations confronted and transcended
their oppression. In this way, Brenner recognized the revolution as an historical event and the philosophies attending it as decolonizing dialogues.

One way that Anita held fast to a decolonizing methodology was to promote *indigenismo* but without the commodification and self-aggrandizing romanticism of the muralists. Susannah Glusker writes that Anita upheld the principles of *indigenismo* to every extent, in her daily life and political views and even in her own spirit. She writes,

> Revolution meant casting off the inner degradation brought by alien rulers. It meant releasing creative energy to give birth to a new people. The process contributed to a developing sense of pride and self-confidence, an assurance that Mexicans could solve their own problems. Anita compared it to the “dawn of selfhood” in adolescence, when one realizes that one can be one’s own person, respecting and accepting oneself and others. That revolutionary process paralleled Anita’s personal experience. (Glusker 99).

Both the revolution and Anita upheld the intention to decolonize their selves and others, and in that process create their own transformation not dependent upon outside resources and approval. As Anita wrote in “Romance and Realism” (1929): They “are building a nation upon folk-lore. Or rather, of letting it build itself” (qtd in Glusker 88). She consciously did not want to re-colonize the indigenous populations or re-inscribe Western theories onto their art; instead, in writing *Altars*, she wanted the history and the practices and philosophies of the indigenous and modern Mexicans to speak for themselves – through their art.

In 1970, Anita Brenner wrote a new introduction to the Beacon Press reprint of *Idols behind Altars*. Brenner begins her Introduction with a comparison of the neighboring countries during the 1920s: “In Mexico, the railroads, the telegraph, the
newspapers, the influx of American capital, and the rising number of people moving back and forth brought on an increasing (almost day-to-day) comparison between life for the people in the United States and life here [in Mexico]. This was the gunpowder and the match” (Brenner 3). Her comparison between the people of the US and Mexico is one which she uses to explain the 1910-1924 revolution to herself and to her readers. It is in this comparison that we so starkly begin to see all that one country has and all that another clearly does not. And there seems to be no rhyme or reason to the disparity; sometimes it seems based on race, class, or gender prejudice, of course, but not always. It seems bigger than that, larger and more insidious, if possible, than something external. It seems systematic, and infectious. There was money, power, and prestige granted to a few, the rest left to wallow in shanties and tenements, their gifts not seen or utilized, even their presence hardly acknowledged. She writes that “At the national – or tribal or racial – level, people come together first in furious repudiation of the dominator, the aggressor and the intruder” (Brenner 4). She writes that the downtrodden must recognize their oppression and reclaim their a self-valuation instead: “This devaluation on the basis of, not exactly color, not exactly race, but the same thing really, cooked and rankled and set working the consciousness of skilled men thoroughly aware of their capacities” (Brenner 4). Brenner here not only sets the stage for a heralding of Native presence and their “capacities,” but also for why and how the working-class consciousness of the “skilled men” becomes the basis for the Mexican revolution, and further, what impact this has on future social, historical, and artistic generations.

The solution to silence and disparity, argues Brenner, is not simply to rise up and spit in the face of the oppressor, but – like the 1970s Black Power movement in the U.S.
– to love one’s self and one’s culture, and to see one’s self as completely independent from the colonizing discourse’s conceptions of who you are or should be. She describes the mindset of the revolutionary intentions:

A mystique, a creed, a faith, an ideal, a cause, a love – whatever spelling you want to put on it, it is all the same – now must take living form. *Us against*, must become *us for*, else the whole experienced beautiful instant of human brotherhood reverts into other names for the old relationships, with authoritarian lust and greed tandem in the power saddle. Genius, humanity, and common sense, in that order – the folk have got to project these into the center of the circus first. (emphasis in original; Brenner 5).

This poetic madness of radical political intent is Brenner’s way of establishing that the Mexican revolution should not simply be a fight against oppression, but instead, more powerfully, a fight *for* Mexican identity. This identity was multi-layered, but she says, as a teenager establishing a mature sense of self through conflict and rites and training this “identity…[is] built up to channel each young person in his time of crisis toward himself, the consciousness of his own soul” (6). This soul is evidenced through the de-colonization of a people and a reclamation of indigenous arts. Art is the only witness, really, for a nation without a blueprint of who to be, except to “Be Mexico, the people of; Find Mexico, the spirit of; Free Mexico, the act of; Sing Mexico, the love of” (7). The modern soul of Mexico is then built entirely on the vague but enthralling premise and promise of this renaissance and revolution.

Part One of *Idols* contains four chapters detailing Mexican history from the ancient Maya to the time just before the turn of the 20th century. Within this vast overview, Brenner establishes what she believes are the foundations of Mexican identity: the artist, the Mestizo, and a transcultural aesthetic.
In Chapter One: Mexican Messiah, Brenner argues that not only is the artist a foundational archetype for the realization of Mexico, but that Mexico itself is a work of art. She writes,

> Without the need for translation or a story sequence, Mexico resolves itself harmoniously and powerfully as a great symphony or a great mural painting, consistent with itself, not as a nation in progress, but as a picture, with certain dominant themes, certain endlessly repeated forms and values in constantly different relationships, and always in the present, like the Aztec history-scrolls that were also calendars and books of creed. (Brenner 15).

Seeing Mexico as an image, not a narrative, implies a constant unfolding and layering and deepening, rather than a linear history with a string of characters and plot twists, and certainly not one actor’s monologue. Without the need to invent a story-line, we can see and feel Mexico as an image. And in particular, Brenner argues, that image is of the “Messiah” – the heroes, the healers, the rebels (16) – who fight for the Mexican nation.

Most importantly perhaps, this messiah is perhaps an artist because “it is the artist’s way, as it is the Mexican way, to disregard other things for the sake of making images” (26). Therefore, Brenner sees the messiah as one who embodies the true spirit of the revolution: a fighter who battles in paints because Mexican “Customs and traditions, laws and habits are ‘the books and paintings of our ancestors;’ descendants and successors ‘the images and portraits’ of their predecessors” (26). Mexico, then, is a mural painting, just as the messiah of the nation is the artist because the entirety of Mexican culture and history is one rendered in images. For Brenner, this artistic ontology, this aesthetic way of being, encapsulates the “Story of the Mexican Spirit.”

Inextricably tied to this ontology is the indigenous population, and in particular the Mestizo, as a body and as a symbol. Brenner writes that
Mestizo Mexico keeps this integrity. Passionately attached to beauty, the Indian repudiates ugliness by disregarding it. The mestizo turns upon it violently….Both are heroic, the mestizo in tone, the Indian in history and daily life. They come together in the heroism postulated as of the highest value by a modern Mexican poet, who was never without his gun: ‘Three heroisms…the heroism of thought, the heroism of emotion, and the heroism of expression.’ This is the key in which Mexico resolves itself. (Brenner 28).

The messiah, then, is the Mestizo or Indian or Mexican hero who expresses himself fully and faithfully in beauty and truth. This is so entirely unique for the construction of a nation, for the understanding of a political and territorial body, that Brenner insists we can do no more comparable analysis.

The need to live, creating with materials; the need to set in spiritual order, the physical world; the sense of fitness – these are the components of an artist’s passion, and these are the Mexican integrity. That is why Mexico cannot be measured by standards other than its own, which are like those of a picture; and why only as artists can Mexico be intelligible. (Brenner 31).

The nation of Mexico is built upon an aesthetic understanding, as embodied by the artist who utilizes the collective, the spiritual and the individual understanding of nation-building; “nowhere as in Mexico has art been so organically a part of life, at one with national ends and national longings, fully the possession of each human” (32). And this artistic integrity comes through each individual’s ancient lineage.

In Chapter Two: The Pyramid Builders, Brenner establishes this sense of modern Mexican identity as solely reliant upon ancient beliefs and artistic practices. She writes that it is the social structures, which were based upon professional guilds and even “older family craft groups” (50), that allowed for turn of the century artist-inspired and communally-based social roles and societal mores. The seamless transition of societal
roles is in part transmitted through “personal versions of inherited images” (52). These “inherited images” are very similar to Katherine Anne Porter’s “racial forms of art” (CEOW 415), and the bloodline and cultural importation of specifically indigenous artistic forms and practices.

These “inherited images” were saved throughout the centuries because, Brenner argues, that while class-based societies were always in flux and threatened by competing economies or the in-fighting of nobility, indigenous and “class-less” societies heralded art as necessary and valuable. One does not live by nobility but by craft because “whatever his work, the craftsman was certain of response, acceptance, [and] a respected place” in a communal and class-less society (51). Brenner implies that this tradition of establishing a society based upon the mutual respect of artists and their craftsmanship is what should become the societal structure of modern Mexico. Modern artists, like the muralist community, are therefore well served to avoid the mimicry of the colonizer’s way of being, and instead revel in the authenticity of their own racial heritage and its representation. The artists, the messiahs, then need to connect on a primal level to their ancestry and, through communication with these “inherited images,” paint Mexico into being.

Just as Brenner sees Mexico as a mural painting, she sees the artists “themselves as a thing of craft” (54). She argues that in ancient Maya culture “It was the static majesty of the gods which every man must reflect, as in turn that majesty, synthesis of power, was the reflection of himself” (54-5). This becomes an especially important philosophical and aesthetic stance in light of the impending colonization of Cortez. Brenner argues that the
pre-conquest Native solidified his sense of self through adherence to his own bloodline and its cultural practices as opposed to succumbing to cultural imperialism.

This then leads us to the next chapter, sardonically titled “The White Redeemers,” where Brenner “depicts with unusual acuity the violence inflicted upon the indigenous population after Cortés’s arrival on the coast of Veracruz, in 1519” (Rashkin 43). This chapter sets the stage for the final chapter of Part One, “Churrigueresque,” wherein Brenner “begins to focus on the relationship between the social and the aesthetic, postulating artistic expression as a potent form of struggle” (Rashkin 43). Brenner uses the narrative of an artist who barely escapes death by the Inquisition through painting an image of the Madonna on his prison cell wall that was so lovely he was granted “spiritual pardon” by one of his captors (Brenner 85). Yet the feudal system that Cortes imported eradicated the guild-based, craftsman system and furthered the cultural imperialism that accompanied the devastating colonization of all of Latin America. While the Inquisition was not supposed to “prosecute Indians, on account of the dispute about whether or not they had souls” (83), the church leaders enslaved and used Native craftsmen to destroy traditional temples, pyramids, and sacred altars in order to erect churches. That did not, however, impede their creation of a transcultural aesthetic. Mikhail Epstein writes, “Though transculture depends on the efforts of separate individuals to overcome their identification with separate cultures, on another level, it is the process of interaction between cultures themselves in which more and more individuals have found themselves ‘outside’ of any particular culture, ‘outside’ of its nationalist, racist, sexist, age, political, and other limitations” (Epstein 298). This process of simultaneous transcendence and
internalization of another’s culture, and then even one’s own, creates its own aesthetic, its own artistic manifestation of a new reality.

Brenner writes that “Talented Indians were brought from missions and half-breeds from towns, and were taught perspective, anatomy, and how to use oil colors” (82). This involuntary art school led to a transcultural art which solidified, not conquered, the Mexican artist and national sprit. To illustrate this Brenner writes of one artist in particular, Manuel Martinez Pintao, whose “work is the logical result of his position. The same problems of craft, which include the same problems of spirit, are solved by him with the same tools and materials. The margin of difference between himself and the colonial artist is not one of time, but of personal force” (94). In particular, Pintao’s wood carvings and sculptures could as easily be from the Italian Renaissance as the Mexican one. His art uses winged angels and great bearded men as much as any nature-bound element. Brenner says that he “is the recurring apex where Mexican and European meet, and make not chronological nor national, but artistic and human terms” (95). Pintao’s sculptures elucidates for Brenner that syncretism, alongside indigenismo, is the creation of a modern world. Colonization might have been accomplished through territory, but did not succeed in any other way. Brenner argues that the Native endured through the sheer might of his craft.

The pioneer monks were accustomed to murals in their places of worship, and the [Native] workmen likewise. Therefore the pioneer temples were decorated in this manner. The technique must have been a combination of European and native fresco. The resultant style varies greatly, is sometimes almost European, sometimes evidently not so. It has always, however, the strength and personality characteristically Mexican, the style of artists very sure of themselves and their ideas” (87-8).
The indigenous craftsman and the Mexican artist were forced to produce, but never lost their “racial spirit” – as Porter would call it – and not only survived a brutal colonization effort, but thrived artistically through creating syncretized art.

Brenner ends Part One by writing that by 1900 the Capital of Mexico had become a “‘Little Paris’” complete with “a snug garrison, a good jail, and a grillwork bandstand in the plaza, where on Sundays the local band – military or militarizing – played Souza marches and Verdi” (98). The colonization of polite society was complete and everywhere was a turn of the century version of a middle-class suburb. Except, of course, just underneath the surface a revolution was brewing and it began with the indigenous and Native workers, their centuries’ long marginalization, the artistic practices that they smuggled through the eras via a transcultural aesthetic, and the desire to not be labeled “anonymous” at the bottom of murals any longer. To quote at length, Brenner concludes:

anonymous people painted miracles on tin or cardboard and hung them with prayers in their favorite shrines. Or murals in the city streets, on the walls of pulquerias with names which, if any one had read them, would have meant arrest of the owner on charge of heresy to the prevailing creed [that producing images was a sin]. The painter could not have been arrested. Nobody knew who he was. And nobody looked at the paintings anyhow…By 1910 all the anonymous people were dreadfully bored with making a good name for themselves at a meaningless distance…The nation was quiet. It wished it were dead. Presently it heaved a monumental sigh” (99).

This great sigh is soon exhaled when the artist re-connects to his land, his Self, his country, each other, and the revolution is ignited.

Part Two begins with Chapter Five: Earth, Straw, and Flesh, and is a meditation on the role of the land, the connection the artist feels to it, and the objects that bridge the
two. She writes that “when you think of an Indian as he does of himself...you begin and end thoughts, emotions, behavior, on the basis of the earth” (105-6). It is not simply a romanticized and pagan conception of the Native and his land, but a fundamental belief that for the Native, the land is “a place of power” (107). Like Porter, Brenner connects la tierra with great power in part because it creates a regionalist aesthetic; each village, because of its geography and terrain and its particular accent and clothing, produces unique crafts and an individual and communal artistic genre. She explains, “The only recognized native law about possession of land is the ancient tenet sung by pre-Columbian ruler of Texococo, Netzahualcoyotl: ‘The land belongs to him who works it with his hands.’ Possession is thus like the inherited design and style in the potter’s and weaver’s family” (108). Brenner details how the labor of an individual creates ownership and this is the same working aesthetic which informs and dictates the creation and expression of art: “Labor therefore is the only title to possession, and, because of the feeling toward its chief materials, a prime religious duty. Mystically, it is the thing which guarantees and makes real the existence of both the man and his materials. Substitute for a field a pot, a loom, and labour becomes also craft, or art” (108). Like her own stance on work and gender, “labor” is not labeled as a burden because it becomes an inclusive process much like the creation and transformation of earth into soil, material into craft, and body into Self.

Further, this system of inheritance, of land, of a family’s weaving designs, and of “inherited images” can be seen as a cultural capital counter to the economic, social, and artistic structures and practices of the colonizers. The perpetuation of Native art then becomes a revolutionary act in and of itself – primarily because it is from and for itself.
Objects, crafts and art in particular, are extensions of the people, their culture, their land because of their blood lineage and through the labor that embraces and creates that art. The laboring creates ownership, not the power or the economics; and the artists, the laborers, are not “the hands” of the owners, but are the hands of creation that “make real the existence of man and his materials.” Brenner goes on to write that

Objects, by a complex esoteric reasoning, were reduced to symbols, they could be owned completely, without reference to the ephemeral things themselves, and this completed the circle which enclosed everything within the human being. Land and its products, all things, were contained in the hands, the head, the body, the blood, the inviolate spirit, linked to abstract god, activity, and fixed in a given place. (Brenner 111-12).

We come full circle to Porter’s “racial spirit” and Brenner’s “Mexican spirit” here and the ways in which art embodies what both authors saw as indicative of a transcultural art that transcended colonization and rejuvenated and re-imagined modernity.

Anita’s primary example of this is the petate. “A petate is the cheapest, most common, and oldest household possession” (123). It is a working-class staple, and an indispensable object of Mexican culture and daily life. It is used as a table, a tablecloth, a dance floor, a prayer mat, a “cradle, curtain, bridal bed, bier” (124). In addition to this, “It is pictured in Aztec codices used exactly as it is today, as a throne, a seat of honour, and as a humble object of versatile and universal service” (123). Accompanying this passage, either Weston or Modotti took a photo of the “Interior of a native house: Xochimilco” that includes a thatched roof, entirely woven, home. There is also a shrine with an unidentified saint and fresh flowers, and several petates on the floor. The viewer becomes a voyeur into an indigenous home and sees the reality of such craft, of such everyday
Mexican art. Brenner writes, “A reed mat, of coarse weave pleasant to the bare sole, of a sincere yellow colour agreeable to the eye; materially irreplaceable, spiritually and essential Mexican symbol” (123-4). Because the petate is both a common object and also a symbolic seat of ancient cultural practice, it becomes a representation for Brenner of how the past is lived in the everyday Mexican home through work and craft, both ancient and modern. She summarizes, “by its kinship to daily and eternal things, the petate is a perfect base for the national philosophy, a perfect frame for the national image. It is place, craft, object” (125).

While the petate highlights how the use of personal and private-sphere craft objects that continue ancient practices in modern life, the religious icons of pantheism and the idealization of the Dark Madonna showcases how syncretism allows for ancient public-sphere practices to be re-imagined for societal survival under colonization.

Brenner asks us to imagine the Indian sitting on his petate. He has done thus for centuries. She writes, “Trace the story of the conquest. At the beginning and end, you find the Indian sitting in the same way, and it must indicate that he is living and thinking much as he always did. Was there a conquest?” (127). Brenner asks us to consider the boundaries by which we measure colonization – who is colonized and by what means? How do we know? She argues that “living the same story, the man assumed another aspect; in his mystical sense, another mask. Is this a conquest? Whose?” (128). She argues that every man in Mexico is the same such manifestation; each individual wears a “mask” to survive colonization, each person secretes away their true practices and beliefs: he is the idol behind the altar.
While “owning an idol made a native liable to severe punishment” each individual and cultural community had such practices (136). For example, in one photograph, “Our Lord of the Tree: Michoacán,” we see the traditional church cross becomes a living, breathing idol of pantheism. A man’s bearded, Christ-like face is imposed at the top; the side bars of the cross become outstretched arms and the elongated base becomes his strong and immovable body. If caught, one could easily argue it is Christ on the cross. But, like all secret practices, the initiated can easily see that the “Lord of the Tree” is an ancient and mystical idol. To further evidence this acculturation Brenner writes of multiple incidences where Friars put crosses everywhere across the land in order to “persuade” the Native to undergo conversion. Crosses were planted all over the hills and valleys, and to their surprise, Natives started attending church. Yet they were not praying in the Friars’ church nor were they praying to the Church’s gods and saints; quoting one Friar, Brenner writes, Natives “‘would put idols under or behind the cross, making believe they adored the cross but adoring really the figure of the demon they had hidden there’” (142). In addition, years later did the Church realize that in their destruction of Native idols and temples, the workers buried the broken temple stones and relics in the foundation of the Churches and so in “attending church” they were actually communing with their old gods. When the church excavated and removed the idols underneath the altars, “the idol was carted to a museum; where upon promptly, devotion ceased” (Brenner 144). The idol behind the altar, then, are the authentically ancient Native practices and the Real faces beneath the masks.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is often held up as the pinnacle of syncretism – a Virgin Mary with dark skin and holding husks of corn, appearing only to a peasant. Brenner uses
the Virgin of Guadalupe to evidence “the interworking of imported form and native content [that] awoke new devotion, which made a new native religion and a new Christian art” (149). Brenner argues that the Native population consciously created a transcultural art form, one that was neither ancient nor Christian, but both:

Pre-Hispanic Mexican divinity, like pre-Hispanic Mexican art, was an abstract thing. The gods which Christian images supplanted were not beings, but complexes, dynamic, disintegrating, constantly reassembling groups of geometric forms and philosophical symbols and emotional associations. Each god had multiple forms and many symbols and attributes, many ‘masks’ (155).

This plasticity of Native arts lends itself not only to survival under colonization but also to an ever-expanding evolution of artistic style, genre, and expression. This is particularly true for the indigenous population, Brenner argues. “Being artists, the Indians became converts to new forms, and being powerful, honest artists, they created their own version of these forms…They had a new martyrdom, and needed this new form. They made it their own so completely that they made it brown” (155-6). The “miracle” of a brown virgin may have been a church calculated one to win over otherwise resistant Native populations, but she also still wholly embodies a divine syncretism – a transcultural symbol that furthered a whole new art form.

Brenner explains in Chapter Seven: Painted Miracles that to the Spaniard miracles were a supernatural event and a religious institution regulated and authorized by the Church (a saint is canonized only after a century and having proved himself/herself through “acceptable” and officially recognized miracles); to the Mexican, however, miracles were natural events, daily and necessary (157). In particular, because miracles and painting “are both national habits” it is no surprise that a transcultural and national
art form is the ex-voto (164). An ex-voto is an oil painting done on tin and depicts moments of divine intervention that needed to be recorded, to be prayed to, and a story that needs to be told over and over again by firelight. Such depictions included the “peasant who retained his land [during the revolution], painted the miracle of it” (165); or the woman who recovered from illness and was released from the hospital who immediately bought a painting of it from a “professional miracle-artist” (166).

Ex-votos symbolize the national convergence of religiosity; a contact zone of ancient and modern, of miracles and saints, of everyday superstitions and of the subtle and sublime ways that the working-class combated and subverted the dominant culture. Maria Rodriguez-Shadow states that ex-votos “gradually became an artistic and religious form of expression favored almost exclusively by the most impoverished and vulnerable social groups” (170). Ex-votos then come to symbolize a movement on behalf of the working-class masses to uphold their everyday culture, faith and lives in opposition to the Church-sanctioned version of mysticism. Brenner writes that there is never any “aesthetic dispute” between the artist and the patron because “so many people painting so many things common to all develop a language” (166). And this communal language is above all Real – “nobody is trying to ‘sell’ anything. The picture is therefore the first thing that a picture should be, and that is, convincing” (167). Ex-votos are the most real of all art, and they, along with public pulqueria murals, embody a working-class and transcultural aesthetic.

The ex-voto embodies a working-class aesthetic because the format of its artistic creation and expression is uniquely its own and its context, understanding, and reception is entirely class-based. For example, Brenner writes that “A professional miracle-artist
profession exists also, because the people, being much pleased with the artistic fashion introduced to them, and being conservative, adapted the occupation to national economics, as was their tradition” (166). It is a “peasant art” and one that is a valid and wholly working-class profession, art, and artistic exchange from local marketplace to private home or public altar. Furthermore, the genre and conventions of the ex-voto “develop, grow, and are not imposed. They grow in direct relation to the subject and the public, divine and human” (167). This fluidity and plasticity of the genre allows it to be both contained in the craft sphere of the working-class and avoid the “imposed” culture of the colonizers. To illustrate how the working-class is never far from the notion of Native and/or Mexican art, and the aesthetic is then inextricably tied in as well, Porter, in her review of Idols, writes that Brenner’s book showcases how the artists of the revolution “took their color from the political and economic atmosphere” (Porter “Old Gods” 85). One might be tempted to ask, what color exactly is economics? It changes apparently, as Brenner argues, in that the color, textures, transmissions, and the “color” meaning feeling or mood, of the ex-votos, for example, shape-shift in symbiosis with the “public, divine and human.”

The ex-voto then maintains itself for the masses and their ethnic identity as Mexican and/or indigenous. The beliefs, the faith as wholly culture-bound “determines the actual style of the painting” (168). Brenner writes,

The little image represents aesthetically the postulate of all possibilities, the spiritual tangent. Pictorially, it is a plastic break with the visible facts of the physical world. It establishes the reality of everything else in the picture, gives movement and significance to it, is an escape, or rather a projection, beyond itself; accentuates by contrast the human and concrete;
abstractly, links the subject to the laws of art by a dynamic symmetry legitimate and real. (168).

Realism, then, is not an authoritative representation of an everyday life, bringing validity to its subjects by its reproduction of a colonial society; it is instead a realism unique to the Native Mexican, and in this case legitimizing only the people, the regional culture, the streets, the divine moment. From this perspective, it is not that the people validate realist art, but that without the ex-voto the people in them would not exist.

Brenner goes on to explain that such realism is also purely aesthetic. “The drama painted in miracles is not a ballet Mexico, not the picturesque candy-coloured scene naively supposed to be Mexican. It is something real put together subtly, live blues cut by vermillion, lucent greens punctured with white, a gray light fused of the rainbow, occurring in a definite, in alternative relationship to the other elements of the events” (170). The colors are determined by the event; the event determined by god and captured by the laboring working-classes. This whole dynamic is what Diego Rivera calls “super-realism” because it is the very fact of a supernatural miracle depicted in daily life – it is not a realism that is an imitation of a moment, not a mimetic copy – but a “true portrait” that contains “an intimacy with facts” beyond anything “realism” as a Western genre has ever known (Brenner 170).

Again juxtaposing private- and public-sphere, and witnessing a transcultural and working-class aesthetic, in Chapter Eight: The Reform of Providence, Brenner discusses how “The streets of Mexico are painted galleries” because of the pulqueria murals (171). Pulque is an ancient drink, made from the maguey plant, and meant to bring about heightened sensations and a closer connection to the divine; in older times elaborate laws
were put into place to regulate its usage (172). Yet over the years, pulque was lost from Native possession and many foreigners adulterated its consumption for the masses, which “bought aristocracy for many immigrants” by creating “vulgarized” pulquerias (173).

The names of the pulquerias become the first signal of their transcultural aesthetic. Brenner writes, “The Spanish-Indian image is also in the names of pulquerias, literary complement of the painting, like a dedication to a miracle-board [ex-voto]. One cannot speak of Indian or Spanish here, only Mexican. These names run in haphazard harmony a commentary on the national scene: ‘The Prowess of Gaona’, ‘The Glories of Obregón’, ‘The Brave Charro of the Sierras.’” The pulquería named “’The Beautiful Helen of Troy’” stands a block away from the pulquería named “’The Lovely Xochitl [the Mexican Goddess of flowers]’” (174).

The pulquería can be seen as a space of contact zone because what was once a highly ritualized rite became a commonplace drinking saloon, yet it also became a space for artistic expression that was seen nowhere else in Mexico. The pulquería is an entirely working-class space, one where workers go to drink and watch the impoverished and almost laughable artists paint a mural on the wall, that, if lucky, may last a month. The artists painted mostly anonymously because nobody had a “name”; anybody with a paintbrush could claim a wall and do as they wished. This painting was an entirely democratic enterprise. Brenner writes that the doors of the pulquerias are “framed in scarlet, indigo, sulphur, cubes and spirals and blocks and scrolls which make the surfaces advance, retreat, bow; dance under lettered fantasy” (171). Like graffiti art today, anyone could lay claim to a public building, but there were still certain specifically Mexican formulations that were necessary: bright colors and complex designs were employed to
create a highly stylized and specific art form, one which could be seen repetitively throughout a multitude of towns.

Brenner explains the significance of such a space: “As a place of emotional escape, a value to the individual, the pulqueria is post-Spanish. It is needed in an alien regime. [But] As a place of catharsis, and solution of problems, of emotional and mental gymnastics, it is native” (175-6). The pulqueria, then, is a contact zone of the “alien regime” yet also a reclaimed space for the Mexican because it is a place for the production and consumption of a uniquely native art. “Pulqueria murals are painted in cheap, brilliant oils which quickly fade and peel. They are therefore constantly changing, are always the national landscape in the present…[and] are stratified sometimes like temple murals. But frequent artistic re-decoration is, while fundamentally the result of a living art, also part of the shop’s budget. Attractive, novel painting is a very real, financially reckonable asset to a pulqueria” (174).

Parallel to ex-voto painters or “miracle-artists,” the pulqueria painter is given validity because his art is considered a national cultural product because it “produces a national property,” and is further legitimized as a profession because “it has economic status” (175). This validation of an artistic practice leads us to see how the mural painters of the 1930s can be so quickly legitimized and heroized in an otherwise war torn and impoverished country. The artistic colors, textures, designs, and images of the pulqueria murals become almost secondary to the symbolism of its production and existence. The working-class place becomes a space of artistic, national, ethnic, and spiritual reclamation; a space that is the embodiment of any individual’s or any country’s process
of transformation, constantly in revision, accomplished by any individual, and always in need of reconsideration – a “living art.”

Brenner goes on to write that “The small-town pulqueria artist copies his metropolitan fellow-craftsman; but the metropolitan takes his theme and imagery from the peasant” (176). Hence, the rest of Part Two illustrates how this exchange from metropolis, urban to peasant, rural and back exists in all art for the masses but particularly in mural painting and ballad singing, and most infamously in the bawdy and comic illustrations of Guadalupe Posada, who created black ink cartoons that combined the elements of Pulqueria working-class consciousness and bawdy humor with nationalistic fervor and revolutionary slogans. There is also a brief history of Villa and Zapata, which leads us to Part Three, a detailed account of the revolution and its individual artists. But before we can see Rivera and Siqueiros for all they are supposed to mean for Mexico and its development, we must see where the connections between ex-votos and pulquerias came to be translated into a national aesthetic and philosophy. This comes entirely from one man.

Part Three begins with Chapter Eleven: Inventory, which details the theories and philosophies of famed Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, the man who single-handedly invented the idea of indigenismo. Gamio’s theory began with a strict idea of decolonization. Summarized in his oft-quoted phrase, “welding a patria,” Gamio argued that we must release the notions of “‘civilizing’” the Native and even of “‘incorporating’” him into modern progress; such ideas he argued are reductive. Instead, we must re-educate the literate. “The achievement of welding a patria means to Gamio a unification on the basis of race and tradition and the deepest and oldest desires. It means founding or
continuing a style, in the sense that artists use the word” (Brenner 230-1). This is done in three primary ways: one, economic and legal improvements must be made for the Native; two, the fields must be returned to the Natives because it “means recognition of his birthright, and this meant real citizens added by their own acceptance, to the nation” (Brenner 230); and three, that artists must go to live with the Natives and peasants to truly “identify himself” with the land and the ideals of the ancients. Gamio himself writes,

‘It was necessary that a painter, a true painter, of sound technique, broad vision, highly sensitive and with a keen analytical point of view, be sent to live in the valley; to…identify himself…with the brilliant blue heaven, the hostile arid mountains, the eternally verdant plains; with the aged colonial temples of stately legend, the timeless ruins breathing mythological drama, and with the stark huts grasped in the claws of the magueys and the cacti…He must live with and become the brother of the native of the valley, accept himself so long as he remained, the customs, the ideals, the pain, the pleasure, the beliefs and amusements of that man.’ (qtd. in Brenner 231).

In what can be seen as a definition of indigenismo, Brenner summarizes Gamio’s philosophy by writing that “The return to native values, spiritual and artistic” is a “simplified description of modern Mexican art” (231). While these new traditions often “occurred by way of modern European art” the Native art itself still embodies “a rejection of European values” leaving the Native artist “with a definite social attitude, a consciousness that must determine his choices in daily life and in his work” (231).

Murals embrace, then, the promise of a transcultural aesthetic as well as a working-class aesthetic in that the act of artistic laboring becomes a specifically stylized enterprise by and for the working-classes. Brenner writes, “By their definition murals in
public buildings would return to art the social meaning and function that it possessed in its great periods in Mexico and elsewhere, and modern murals with a new social ideology would dovetail into Mexican tradition – would follow up, or complete, the pre-Hispanic temple walls, the colonial church frescoes, and the pulquerías. It was the most obviously legitimate form of the great native art” (240).

In the following chapters, Brenner details how specific artists contributed to this renascence. Painter Carlos Merida utilized the “pure plastic symbols” of his “Mayan grandfathers” (232); Dr. Atl, art critic, writer, painter, labour organizer and medicine-man supported their efforts through gallery shows (233); Adolf Best-Maugard was the “first pedagogical-artistic experimenter [who] went digging in archeological collections and bargaining at fairs” (237); Best-Maugard’s successor, painter Manuel Rodriguez Lozano, “was interested in the barrios, where live the poorer mestizo” (238); and Abraham Angel traduced traditional decorations into modern paintings before his untimely death at 19 (239). These few, among many others, have become world-renowned contributors to the effort, but it was David Alfaro Siqueiros who articulated the mission of sustaining transculturalism most eloquently.

In 1921 Siqueiros wrote an article for Vida Americana that stated “‘We must rebuild in painting and sculpture their [indigenous and Native] values, and create at the same time new values…Like the classic artists, we must achieve purpose within the inviolable laws of aesthetic balance. We must like them, be good craftsmen; and like them too, we must have a constructive base and great sincerity’” (qtd in Brenner 241). Echoing Gamio, Siqueiros did not want to perpetuate a fetishization of the “primitive” as some other artists and intellectuals did. He argues that modern artists should
observe the work of our ancient people, the Indian painters and sculptors (Mayas, Aztecs, Incas, etc.). Our nearness to them will enable us to assimilate the constructive vigour of their work, in which there is clear knowledge of the elements of nature, and these things can serve as the point of departure…We can possess their synthetic energy without falling into lamentable archeological reconstruction…Let us not flee to ‘archaic’ motifs. We must live our marvelous dynamic age” (242).

And this is his most drastic point of departure with Diego Rivera and others in the Muralist school of thought. Siqueiros wanted to avoid the racialized and nationalistic tendencies of strictly adhering to an “archaic” artistic expression and romanticized philosophy around the Native population. In contrast to national sentiment that the Native is the ideal symbol for a modern Mexico identity and art, he continues: “‘Let us furthermore reject theories postulating a ‘national art.’ We can make ourselves universal. Our racial elements will appear inevitably’” (242). Siqueiros deemed the performativity of a “national art” in general and indigenismo in particular as counter to art’s true function: connection, humanism, revitalization of an organic and individual as well as universal expression.

Siqueiros was not alone, however, in his philosophical stance, and to counter the government officialization and romanticization of the past and present Native, Siqueiros and others created an organization, The Syndicate of Painters and Sculptors. In Chapter Twelve, Brenner summarizes their mission: “This group operated towards two ends which can be seen as one: the construction of a new art, re-integrated to a social function” (245). Brenner argues that aesthetic theories previously touted ‘art for art’s sake’ or ‘art for the people’ both of which are an “aesthetic fallacy.” She says that
Art is necessarily a thing of the people, not an abstract concept, nor a vehicle for exploiting whims. The search for true expression of mass feeling is not to be confused with the doctrine that plastic art, to be reconstructive or revolutionary, must be subservient to the propagation of prescribed ideas. A [mural] panel fully conceived from pure emotion, and portrayed according to the aesthetic laws of the craft, will generate its own *morale*” (Brenner 245-6).

The Syndicate came to represent all that an arts organization could become in society: to hold an intellectual and knowledgeable discourse around artistic theory as well as teach basic art classes in local *barrios* (Brenner 249). The one distraction was that the Syndicate also held many, many fiestas and it was in part due to this debauchery (and Diego Rivera’s infamous womanizing) that the Syndicate and the Muralists came under fire – sometimes literally.

Since it was the age of manifestos, the Syndicate defended itself through wordy and confrontational diatribes. The “Declaration: Social, Political, and Aesthetic” was written for the masses, and declared that the artists were on the side of the workers. They reassured their working-class audience that their mural painting was a type of labor, and that “Making beauty: the art of the Mexican people is the greatest and most healthy spiritual expression in the world” (254). They go on to say that the process of “making beauty” necessarily involves repudiating “so-called easel art” as aristocratic and “individualistic masturbation” while their social movement “is one of transition between a decrepit order and a new one.” Since the muralists are the creators of this beauty, they “must put forth their best efforts to make productions of ideological value for the people” (255). Yet the more that the muralists attacked the Mexican government and the bourgeoisie, and constantly and continuously depicted the working-class as bowed down and oppressed, the more all people began to bristle. The masses started to feel like the
muralists had too much power, were too arrogant, and abused their powers of public
to represent by romanticizing their daily lives, as oppressed or as heroes. Students
began to destroy the murals, and despite a presidential order that the murals were to be
protected, government officials were assailed with protests from outraged citizens and
 Syndicate painters began to be fired (Brenner 257). Slowly, the Syndicate disbanded and
each artist was left to his own devices; “little by little,” Brenner concludes, “they have
become their own protectors” (259).

Thus we find that Chapters Thirteen through Seventeen are focused not on
traditional, collective or even national artistic practices, but on individual artists; David
Alfaro Siqueiros, Jose Clemente Orozoco, Diego Rivera, Francisco Goitia, and Jean
Charlot, respectively. Each of the chapters gives a very brief biography or background of
the artist, shyly details some of his work, generally allots four to seven reprints of his art,
and then often concludes by stating how each is in dialogue with the others.

These short artistic biographies read like a gallery catalog bio or a sound-bite. They are comprised of succinct and deliberate paragraphs, detailed only in their
superficiality; the tone of the sentences read like each artist is being introduced at a
dinner party where no one speaks the same language: “Like all residents of Mexico born
before 1930 Orozoco was intimately affected by the revolution” (Brenner 271). These
chapters read as somehow disaffected and even flip after the extremely comprehensive
history before. While the overall intention of Idols is an introduction for Westerners to
Mexican history and art, these chapters read like a handbook for whites, Northerners or
well-meaning liberals on which stand to take and how to discuss Mexican art without
embarrassing yourself; from Chapter Fifteen: Diego Rivera: “The present Mexican
government does not endorse communism, but the sermons in fresco fit just as well into the current thinking of ‘Revolutionaries,’ and no one in Mexico who has any pretense to office or intellect will be accepted as a legitimate pretender if he affiliates himself outside that exceedingly large and heterodox army” (Brenner 286). Suddenly Brenner is warning her readers about Communism and putting revolutionaries in quote marks. But what is primarily problematic about Part Three’s introduction of individual artists rather than the collective identity of indigenous artists is, as Elisssa Rashkin notes, that the indigenous artists of “deep Mexico” “disappear from the text at the very moment when their cultural and aesthetic contribution is recognized and incorporated into the ‘Mexico imaginario’ (imaginary Mexico). The native artisans fail to become subjects in their own right and instead are used to validate the work of urban modernists” (Rashkin 48). Brenner, only at this very juncture, subsumes the importance of the Native and his validity as a craftsman, and further, as representative of a collective, national aesthetic, to heighten and applaud the individual, Western-validated muralists. It is an odd, digressive and somewhat dangerous divergence from the overall premise and Introductory intention of Idols.

Brenner begins to conclude Part Three generally by writing that there is a vague feeling that “Europe is dying” and so “Mexico has a new value to contribute to the artistic and spiritual world” (313). This then leads to her final chapter, Revolution and Renascence, where she concludes the book succinctly, almost severely, by acknowledging her contemporary reality, post-revolutionary artists and pre-globalization:

In the span of one generation Mexico has come to herself. Her first and definitive gesture is artistic…It is a nation which establishes a school for sculpture before thinking of a Juvenile Court, and which paints the walls
of its buildings much sooner than it organizes a Federal Bank. Sanitation, jobs, and reliably workable laws are attended to literally as a by-product of art. (314).

Aside from this few sentence introduction, Brenner avoids almost all other mention of art, *indigenismo*, and references to a Mexican identity. Instead, she goes into detail about the consequences of poverty, the “Indians who die of overwork,” and how, outside of the cultural centers, the rest of Mexico is, for good or ill, “unmapped, unexploited, unlinked to western civilization except by occasional aeroplane” (314). Brenner normalizes this poverty and general abandonment by writing that all great civilizations have undergone such a period; Ancient Greece was gripped by “barbarians and before that torn in class conflict and family dispute;” likewise, the Italian city-states were marred by “battle and treachery, [and] had no more desolate and painful a social panorama than this” (315).

She recovers some semblance of a positive Mexican identity by introducing her audience to the next generation of artists: painters Rufino Tamayo and Agustin Lazo, who are “to be watched with critical interest” (317); Paul (Pablo) Higgins, the “gifted Irishman ‘gone Mexican’” (320); Mariano Azuela, a doctor by profession but a writer by design (323); and finally musician Carlos Chavez whose music she describes as a syncretism of “Radically abstract modern Europe and the scraped bones, thronged drums, clay bells and razor-toned flutes of native America” (325)

Finally, she ends geographically, and by proxy, politically. Brenner discusses the Rio Grande as a particular space for contact zone experiences and expansion. She writes, “The Rio Grande basin is an archeological zone affiliated with Mexico, but differentiated from it, and affiliated too with the Pueblos on the other side of the river” (327). Yet she mentions this transcultural exchange of indigenous peoples would happen through
“intermarriage” and not a syncretism or exchange of art, as one would expect she’d argue. While she has never before mentioned the non-Mexican Native Americans, she seems to imply now that all “Indo-Americans” must realize their importance and place in the new modern era.

What is most striking about her conclusion, however, is not that she releases art and the “Mexican spirit” from her grip almost entirely, but that she is also silent on the impact of the revolution for either Mexico itself or the United States. (In fact the only mention of the United States is that it makes the ammunition, literally and metaphorically, for the revolutions in Mexico). Instead she focuses on the southern parts of Latin America, and writes that Venezuelans, Peruvians, Nicaraguans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, and even Cubans and Columbians, “write and they whisper lyrically: ‘My dreams, brewed in your soil, my America, race of my grandfathers; my dreams, brewed in your soil, perfumed and steaming as barbeques, I place in the prow, in the hands of your Mexico, which protects my country with its body’” (Brenner 328-9). The Mexican revolution of “brushes and guns” then becomes one of the whole Latin America; it becomes a revolution of territory, reclamation, and communal support and structure throughout the entire continent.

Brenner finally acknowledges that art does have a role in this pan-global and indigenous revolution and renaissance when she writes her last lines: “Except to believers in miracles, pictures and verses are no shield against bullets. As shields and as symbols however they are taken by persons who hope to re-duplicate the Mexican miracle, and the Mexican heroism…So long as the country paints and sings because it has fought, continues consistently itself, its unhappy neighbors can also sign and hope to fight…In its
course it unfolds the rise of America” (329). Even though Brenner implies, as does Porter, that the revolution has failed, she urges us in other nations to still learn from Mexico’s “unfolding” process and transformation and continue to work toward the rise of all of the Americas.

Despite an appreciation for Brenner’s archeologically-inspired endeavor, one 1931 critic concluded his review of *Idols* by stating that the reviling of European tastes for the idealizing of “native values, spiritual and aesthetic” is but “a passing fad” (Mecham 361). Thankfully for us, this reviewer’s opinion did not portend the future. This is due in part to Katherine Anne Porter and Anita Brenner’s works having contributed to the overall appreciation, receptivity, and acclaim that Mexican crafts and art celebrated in the US and in Mexico.

But more than just heralding the working-class art of a marginalized people, Porter and Brenner meant to elucidate value – high aesthetic value – in the intermixing of genres, in the transculturalism that persists despite colonization, and further, to truly and deeply question that colonization and its consequences as well. Brenner writes about the “Mexican Christ”: an acculturated icon, a “strange, impressive, living image, and a native one” whose very existence and image reminds us that “Every cycle and every day, in the same, and in different forms, the great Mexican drama is consummate. If the new story with an old theme was shaped differently; living the same story, the man assumed another aspect; in his mystical sense, another mask. Is this a conquest? Whose?” (128). Brenner, and Porter, push the expected boundaries of what is deemed worthy, who is
given a voice, and how we view truth and reality and their representations, in art and crafts.

Their expansive world view might come in part from both women having experience with a working-class life, both living in Mexico or at least very near it, for most of their childhoods; neither was religious really, and neither felt wholly at home with one lifelong partner, or country, or career. I think that they felt more at home with the ungraspable and inextinguishable longing they felt and saw in art. I think they instinctually and organically connected to living with one foot in the margins at all times, and with the individual’s possibility to express this, express anything at all, in art – high art, folk art, a saloon wall mural, it didn’t matter. It was a voice, it was one person calling out to another through shape and color and texture and symbolism. And in Mexico in 1930, everyone – absolutely everyone – wanted to take that feeling and instinct and moxie and make it a national philosophy.

Both women went to Mexico because they had a connection to the country and its people, and felt called to return “home,” especially at the moment of its rebirth. Both women were situated at the perfect age, at the perfect moment in their careers and in their personal lives to take such an adventurous risk and leap of faith. And it paid off. Literarily and academically, both Porter and Brenner became celebrated authors and academics, masters of their craft, over these and the next few years.

They challenged norms and attempted a decolonization of themselves and multiple countries, and opened up an entirely new perspective on working-class crafts and art and transcultural aesthetics. While they, too, participated in the romanticization of
the working classes and Native populations, they accomplished much deconstruction both for their era and their political intentions. For instance, in Porter’s 1943 review of Brenner’s *The Wind that Swept Mexico* Porter writes, “I think Miss Brenner yields again to her old temptation to give too pretty and simple a picture – for, mind you, this terrible little story she tells is a bedtime lullaby beside the reality – and in general, to treat individual villains, whom she really knows to be such, too gently.” But, Porter goes on, she must also acknowledge the difficult conditions under which women write and voice opinions in public, something she knew all too well: “Within the more multiple and complicated limitations of the present international political situation, she has perhaps ventured as far as she might and still have her book published at all” (qtd. in Glusker 208). Both women were scrappers, fighting to accomplish to something grander than their context would allow, and in the case of these two texts, it was to expose and uphold the living arts against a backdrop of romanticized and national “dead” arts that were – arguably – resuscitated solely as a revolutionary means to a political end.

But when Katherine Anne Porter says of Mexico in the 1930s that there was an “atmosphere of the living arts” (qtd. in Lopez), she believed that that life was breathed through a racial spirit, through a Jungian collective unconscious where ancient lineages made manifest the art of a peoples who were true artists. Similarly, when Anita Brenner writes in *Idols* that that Native and Mexican art is a “living art” (175) because of the constant revisions and reclamation that surrounds it, she means that these “inherited images” are more real than any pictorial representation.

Brenner writes a summary passage in *Idols* that I believe encapsulates her sentiments, and if I may be so presumptuous, possibly Porter’s as well: “Religion has
always been the dynamo of Mexican art; idols on altars, crosses on mountains, idols behind crosses….The same persistent, questing wants have built pyramids and modeled miniatures, cut tissue-paper fringes for pulquerías, and made multiple masks and symbols the projection of a single beauty with many facets” (Brenner 244). This for me envelops both women and both texts: women who wore multiple masks, and who were also, with their texts and the works of art they presented, the symbol of a “single beauty with many facets.”
“‘You see I’m trying to learn to paint what people think and feel; to get away from all that photographic stuff. When I look at you, I don’t see what a camera sees, do I?’”


Tina Modotti relied on the real, and, often going even further than those around her, she required a certain depth from her reality; when she didn’t find it, she created it. On the one hand, this led her to travel the globe in search of harsher and more complicated realities; on the other hand, it led to her suspicious death at the young age of 46. Her life is fantastical, and her seriousness about her own life is fascinating. Once you start engaging Modotti, it is an enticing and irresistible puzzle that is nearly impossible to stop unraveling. You can’t help but follow her like a lost puppy; trailing at her heels down all the dusty streets of Udine, Italy where she was born, to the hills of Hollywood where she became a silent movie star, to Mexico and the artists’ colony lifestyle she was a part of. You may become weary of following her to Moscow, Berlin and Madrid, where she forsakes art for work with the Communist Party, you may even believe the rumors that she is a spy. The rumors become hard to ignore when one of her lovers is gunned down in the streets – and though she is legally acquitted of any complicity and wrongdoing, maybe she’s still guilty of some lingering doubts in your mind so that when she dies – or is murdered – in the back of a cab in 1942, maybe it is no surprise to you, and you are even relieved though saddened that the world has lost her vision for truth and beauty. But maybe she was just too much – too much intrigue, too much scandal, too much reality for the world to handle.

Modotti moved through multiple personas, multiple lives even, like a snake molting its skin. Her entire context, let alone reality, shifted with each of her mercurial moods. What I am most invested in is how she took these realities, translated them through the lens of her ever-present Graflex, and once the prints were shown to her neighbors, published in local Socialist newspapers, and exhibited on the world stage,
Modotti let them, pushed them, and begged them to change others’ perspectives and visions as her own did. Elena Poniatowska writes in *Tinisima*, a fictionalized account of Modotti’s life, that Tina “would like to raise reality to the level of art” (127). I believe this also works in the reverse: that Modotti could raise art to the level of reality. She was intent on breathing life into the photo’s two-dimensional frame, just as much as she was committed to breathing life back into the workers of the world and making their reality a reality for all people who looked at her framed visions. She wanted photography to be valid and serious; she also wanted the lives she photographed to be seen with rapt attention and active camaraderie. She insisted that realist and documentary photography was the sole tool and the revolutionary medium to change the world’s social reality. However, when the Communist Party consumed her life’s intention, she renounced art and argued that she needed instead to “serve the cause.”

Over the course of Modotti’s *kunstslerroman* she embraced the Pictorialism of Edward Weston, expanded upon his technique in aligning with the Mexican *Estridentistas*, and then, when social causes and civil rights became the driving force that guided her life, she embraced social realism in order to depict the Mexican nationalist movement of *indigenismo*. Rather than simply echo the nationalist-driven artistic fervor, however, Modotti created her own working-class and feminist aesthetic that revolutionized the function and purpose of the camera in both artistic understanding and political intentions. In exposing this aesthetic endeavor, I hope to show that while Modotti embraced political movements and their corresponding artistic genres, she did at multiple points in her life surpass the nationalist movement, its attendant politics, and its fad-like artistic callings. She took all of these contextual and socioeconomic markers and
transcended them. In this frame of mind, we can see the ways that Modotti wielded the camera as a weapon in its documentary utilitarianism. Yet we can go further than that and see how she surpassed her era’s evocation of realism and its mimetic verisimilitude, in order to create her own working-class and gender and even feminist aesthetic to propel the role of art beyond romanticism and into revolution.

![Edward Weston. *The White Iris*. 1921.](image)

There is nothing wrong with using beauty to fight darkness. Modotti well knew: beauty was a tool you could fight a revolution with. Yet her entire overly-complicated life seemed to push her towards some cataclysmic meaning and final end. By the time Modotti moved to Mexico in 1923, she was already Edward Weston’s lover, model and assistant, a recent widow (of Roubaix de L’Abrie Richery, a French Canadian photographer), an ex-Hollywood actress, and a former factory seamstress who had solely supported her family of six in San Francisco. She was 27 years old. The Mexican
Revolution had recently ended, and with it the Porforio regime ended. Modotti arrived just after President Obregon took office and appointed the exiled Jose Vasconcelos as Minister of Education. Vasconcelos believed that the Natives of Mexico should be rescued from obscurity and marginalization, that the masses should be educated, and that art was the path of highest redemption (Constantine 52-3). Modotti stepped into this moment of vast intellectualism, global dialogues, and political and artistic renaissance, feeling that her soul had found its true home.

In the following years, Modotti became quickly settled into a serious and dependent relationship with her camera, just as her dependence on Weston lessened. After she and Weston completed working with Anita Brenner on *Idols behind Altars* in 1926, she found cause and purpose in the political struggles of the day, and companionship among revolutionaries. In 1927 she joined the Communist Party and her life became more like a spy novel than an artistic journey. In January 1929, her lover Antonio Mella, a Cuban exile, was shot and killed as they walked down the street arm in arm. Modotti was the prime suspect for what was assumed to be a “crime of passion.” The local papers ran her entire interrogation interview as *la policia* grilled her about her sexual relationships with Mella and Xavier Guerrero, newspapers called her a femme fatale, and everyone seemed to question her morality, asking how she could love so many men and still love the revolution (Constantine 171). It is at this time that Modotti went to Tehuantepec to photograph the women of the region, and created what I will argue is a work of feminist aesthetics. However, this is the close of her artistic era because soon after her return, in 1930, she was framed for the assassination of President Rubio and *la policia* arrested then quarantined her as an “enemy of the state,” until they finally
expelled her from the country. She was given two days to leave Mexico, and, scattering her belongings (with a Graflex being caught in the hands of Katherine Anne Porter), Modotti made her way to Berlin and then to Moscow. By 1936 Modotti and her partner, Vittorio Vidali, a fellow Italian she had originally met in Mexico, moved to Spain to aid in the Civil War effort. Modotti, who declined to claim a country of origin or be tied to any political or artistic affiliations, was called simply Maria, and she became known solely for her work attending to orphans (Lowe 46). When the war ended in 1939, Modotti, still incognito as the Spanish nurse Maria, tried to enter the United States but was held for false documents and then refused entrance; ironically she was corralled with 40,000 other Spanish refugees back to Mexico for political asylum. Modotti then lived in Mexico for three years before she died in the back of a taxicab, under suspicious circumstances (Hooks, Phaidon; Lowe 1995).

There are countless biographies of Modotti, so here I will focus on her artistic work in Mexico beginning with Weston as her photography mentor and inducting her into the canon of romanticism. What she learned from Weston was invaluable—form, linearity, formalist technique—and as she became more interested in political action than a technical avant-garde, she catapulted from the very spot she left Weston standing. When she published her article “Sobre la fotografía/On Photography” in Mexican Folkways in 1929, Modotti was well aware of how and why she was entering the larger debates surrounding the use and purpose of the camera, artistically and politically. The history, role, and function of photography informs her decisions, actions, and choices. In fact, the debates surrounding photography as an art are almost as contentious as the debates surrounding Modotti herself.
Since its inception, photography has stood in the middle of a crossroads between art and individualism, becoming the symbol for a polarizing debate of the Modern era. When the dry-plate process allowed for the camera to become mobile and accessible to the general public, it sparked a revolution about the meaning and function of art, how art intersects with and relies on science, and what “high art” then means when every individual has access to it. Further fragmenting the divide between art and science, aesthetics and individuals, were the democratizing influences, the class politics, and the gender wars, all held tightly in the hands of the new Kodak. On the one side of the debate was photography’s tentative status as an art form. It was believed that because of its mimetic propensity, photography alone could not be an art form because it removed the artist’s ability to manipulate and re-cast reality from the artist’s point of view – through his Genius. The camera questioned the necessity of an artist’s creative responsibility and individual visuality. Many did not therefore consider photography a worthy art, a high enough art, a fine art. However, during the pervasive American poverty of the 1930s, it was precisely this verisimilitude that legitimized the camera’s value and utility in capturing an economic depression and the personal crises that followed; a terrain so harsh that it needed a scientific witness, an objective positionality to cast back an equally harsh truth that even when lived, may be denied. This, then, leads us to see how the camera, in the short span of thirty years can be both read and prized as an artistic form providing a wholly new aesthetic and simultaneously a vehicle for the real and witness for a new American class consciousness and identity.

If in the mid- to late-1800s photography was considered a tool of scientific documentation, then by 1900 it had taken on the avant-garde argument of aesthetics
versus reality. In the early 1900s, there were many photographers (many of whom were trained in classical and Victorian painting) who utilized the camera to function as a paintbrush, and aptly called their genre Pictorialism. Through darkroom manipulation, utilizing different filters and lens, as well as scratching and “painting” on the developing image, the Pictorialists created a softened face, a moody sky, a melted atmosphere, an ambience of smoke and mirrors, and because of this artistic manipulation, photography could no longer be considered outside the realm of an individual artist’s power and romanticized but apparently necessary Genius.

In the States, pictorialist photographers such as Alfred Steiglitz, Gertrude Kaseiber, and Edward Steichen organized into a group called the Photo-Secessation. This style similarly embraced the Expressionist mode of creating multidimensional emotional structures from everyday moments as well, but it was meant to be solely and completely subjective. The Czech art historian Antonin Matejcek stated in 1910 that “An Expressionist rejects immediate perception and builds on more complex psychic structures” (qtd. in Gordon 175). This is not to say, however, that the Real did not collide with the Pictorialists’ desire for a kind of high art morality. By attempting to “trademark” photography as a fine art, the Pictorialists used Expressionist “psychic structures” that by perspective and trope alike reinscribed gender and class stereotypes.

In Between Amateur and Aesthete: The Legitimization of Photography, Paul Spencer Sternberger states that

Over the course of the 1890s, Steiglitz and his circle reinserted the class distinction of the early art-minded amateur and shared an affinity with the antitechnology values of the Aesthetic movement. Americans in particular celebrated the supposed democratizing effect of photography, yet the elite photographers effectively negated the democratizing effects of the accessibility of photography by making art photography a selective social sphere. (xvi).

Here, then, is the great divide that the fin-de-siecle illuminates: self versus society. While certain individuals and groups, namely Steiglitz in America and the Brotherhood of the Linked Ring in England, championed the ideal of democracy, they forcefully established groups and clubs that were exclusionary along race, gender, and class lines in both practice and belief. Kasebier’s Blessed Art Thou Among Women demonstrates what the Pictorialists were advocating: a posed, painted, ethereal subject, symbolic of a moral code
and aligned with dominant discourse gender and class politics. It is, in every way, a professionally staged photograph of a “real” moment according to turn of the century social mores.

Some photographers quickly tired of the mimetic qualities, the bourgeois aesthetics, and the artificiality of the Photo-Secessionist’s Pictorialism, and Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, Paul Strand, and Consuelo Kanaga, among others, formed an opposition group they called f/64. It is so named after the aperture setting on a large format camera that provides a very sharp, clean focus (Hostetler).

“They argued that the medium was uniquely equipped to convey the essence of physical reality through the representation of clearly focused detail, an approach that came to be known as straight photography” (Trachtenberg 116). What is most important about f/64 and straight photography is that they intentionally created a realist form of photography and thereby a politicized photographic process. f/64 not only veered in opposition from the moralizing and romanticism of Pictorialism, but also from both the class and gender conscription inherent in a “fine art” style and its philosophy. As Edward Weston once wrote, “‘The camera should be used for a recording of life, for rendering the very substance and quintessence of the thing itself, whether it be polished steel or palpitating flesh’” (qtd. in Hostetler). Lisa Hostetler goes on to write that “A corollary of this idea was that the camera was able to see the world more clearly than the human eye, because it didn’t project any of its personal prejudices onto the subject” (Hostetler). f/64 saw that in breaking away from the limiting boundaries that “fine art” photography needed to create in order to sustain itself, modern photography was going in the direction of revolution and that revolution was not in the home and framed by a softened doorway, it
was, instead, out in the wide open spaces of the West, in the nakedness of the terrain, in the stark contrast of whites and Natives, and in the counter-perspective of transnational and female photographers. In the 1930s Bernice Abbott bluntly stated about “fine art” photography that “the imitation was of bad painting, because it had to be bad, dealing largely or wholly with the sentimental, the trite and pretty, the picturesque. Thus photography was torn from its moorings, the whole essence of which was realism” (qtd. in Trachtenberg 181).

Modotti’s early work fit into this context, and clearly paralleled the genres of her era. Through 1924 and 1925 Modotti shot typewriters, drinking glasses, lilies, cacti, doorways, telephone lines, and roses – they were shadowy, elongated, over-exposed images that showcased her fresh and new relationship to her camera (and to Weston) more than to Mexico and its politics. Her lens was tentative, peeking around doorways to test angles, sneaking through windows to experiment with capturing close-up, almost invasive portraits in the shade of a Yubbcca tree. She also blends perfectly a Realist use of stark light and “straight” focus with the Romantics’ desire to come closer and closer to an object’s inner beauty. Similarly, the photos Edward Weston took of Modotti are clearly Romantic attempts to capture not only her beauty, but the essence of it. Sarah Lowe writes that although Modotti’s *momenti mori* still lifes were often read as procedural, they should indeed be considered a part of her larger oeuvre because of the symbolism and transformative aspects she brought to them.
Modotti’s *Roses* (1925) combines multiple artistic perspectives and techniques. Because it is so close-up and imperfect, the image becomes insistent and almost overly intimate. It forces the viewer inside the camera lens, further inside the roses, pushing us deeper into something we normally hold at arm’s length. The intensity of the curled petals combined with the absence of space in the frame leaves us no room to breathe, no moment for respite, and we are pushed into the decadence, the intimacy of the moment in a way that forces the otherwise romantic metaphor of roses to their breaking point. This is the quintessential nature of Modotti’s work: to take a moment and push it beyond the boundaries of the camera’s lens, into the frame, and so to take an image into the aesthetics hidden deeply, yet in plain view, of our ordinary perspective.

In moving from Pictorialism to realism we see that Modotti does so in a forceful,
yet intimate, way. Others saw the move as political, moving from capturing a closed, often stereotyped and overly-aestheticized image to capturing reality in its starkest, even ugliest state.

Cultural movements running parallel to Realism and “straight photography” include arguments similar to Abbott’s, such as the desire to produce an unbiased truth and reality, as well as taking into account the determining context of one’s environment as in Naturalism. “Straight photography” seemed to portend the need for a vehicle to capture the harsh and desperate time that barreled down on the States; the Depression, the Dust Bowl, the breadlines; what other medium but the social realism of photography could exist in such a time? The stark and vast landscapes of the West are no longer just spaces of Ansel Adam’s natural world, they become instead the vast and horrifying terrains of our modern loneliness; add a destitute woman and her hungry children into the frame and you instantly have a national symbol for social injustice and life’s cruelty. This cultural shift along with the economic push to make the Kodak a ubiquitous machine had more ramifications than anyone foresaw. As Susan Sontag has written, “the subsequent industrialization of camera technology only carried out a promise inherent in photography from its very beginning: to democratize all experiences by translating them into images” (7). What these realist or straight photographers did was capture the reality already being lived and push them back to us as consumable images. Only in this exact moment could Tina Modotti claim herself as a photographer, and re-produce images of women that utilized her “feminine qualities” of empathy, insight, and emotionality to create a feminist aesthetic never before possible in any other reality.
As Dorothea Lange wrote in the 1930s:

I am trying here to say something about the despised, the defeated, the alienated.
About death and disaster.
About the wounded, the crippled,
The helpless, the rootless,
The dislocated.
About duress and trouble.
About finality.
About the last ditch.

(qtd. in Fryer Davidov 220-1).


In the beginning, social photography also utilized romantic ideals and Expressionist techniques in order to soften the blow of reality, as seen in the 1890s
photographs of Jacob Riis. Famous for his haunting depictions of “street urchins” Riis brought a level of empathy and a call to action to his realist photography. However, he was also known for posing his subjects and manipulating his scenes, frames, and images to illicit a certain sympathetic response from his viewers that “straight” Realists found emotionally manipulative and untrue to the art form. In parallel, Lewis Hine and his former student Paul Strand, both very invested in the social reform movement of the Progressive Era, wanted to create a photographic movement of visual evidence against social injustice without manipulation. Reality, in their view, was real enough. While Riis was aiming for shock-value in the Expressionist use of emotion, Hines had a more Naturalist view and wanted to show working-class folks – from his famous child labor exposes to steel workers and mothers caring for hungry children – in their “natural” contexts: tenements, steel mills, alleys with hundreds of interweaving lines of dirty laundry. What “saved” him from the Naturalist determinism of his era is that he believed that photographic objectivity would not only be evidence of society’s social justice, but more so that it would witness people’s ability to survive it (Trachtenberg 109). Modotti quickly realized that social realism was her genre. It did everything she needed it to: it highlighted the reality she so loved, exposed gender constraints, and illuminated class consciousness.

As Stacy I. Morgan writes in *Rethinking Social Realism: African American Art and Literature, 1930-1953*, “American social realists did not simply apply the stylistic conventions of academic art to poor and working-class subjects. Rather, they formulated an aesthetic that self-consciously eschewed conventional notions of ‘beauty’ for a style that aimed to capture a more dynamic sense of what they took to be the rough-edged
quality of life among the masses of American citizenry” (Morgan 112). There was in social realism an expression of the urgent desire many felt for unification in the face of so much fragmentation and separation. These dark and overwhelming feelings needed a particular kind of expression, a unique kind of art, to voice such a drastic psychological and perspectival shift; it becomes, as Stacy Morgan attests, a “new aesthetic” not put upon the masses, but born from them: a working-class aesthetic; one that combines the raw intention of social realism and an appreciation for and exploration of the beauty of everyday life.

Modotti begins contributing to this new aesthetic in her 1929 “Sobre la fotografía” essay when she wrote,

Always, when the words “art” and “artistic” are applied to my photographic work, I am disagreeably affected. This is due, surely, to the bad use and abuse of these terms.

I consider myself a photographer, nothing more. If my photographs differ from that which is usually done in this field, it is precisely because I try to produce honest photographs, without distortions or manipulations. The majority of photographs still seek “artistic” effects, imitating other mediums of graphic expression. The result is a hybrid product that does not succeed in their work the valuable characteristic it should have, - photographic quality. (Modotti 196).

At this time in the Modern era, Modotti is able to voice an artist’s deeply emotional response to an increasingly fragmented and mechanical reality. In the context of industrialism, the severity of photography seems more organic. It also, then, seems natural for the artists to question what their individual role is in an assembly-line mentality society; to ask how an artist should capture and depict the electrical current
beneath suffering, the loss of humanity, and political insurgency. How does art even enter such a dialogue? Modotti answered this call by integrating “art” and her role as an “artist” with honesty – a word that then becomes synonymous to her with photography – to create her own aesthetic; one that may have come from the United States’ political upheaval but then also became undeniably aligned with Mexican politics, the social justice movement, and *indigenismo*.

Technically speaking, Modotti’s “*Sobre la fotografía*” summarizes both sides of the debate on the artistic merit of the camera by stating that “there are those who recognize the merits of photography in its multiple aspects and accept it as the most eloquent, the most direct means for fixing, for registering the present epoch” (Modotti 196). “The present epoch” includes what Modotti sees as the camera’s rightful place in the lineage of artistic tools: the latest “manifestation of our mechanical age.”

Modotti goes on to bring the argument to a quick close by stating: “To know whether photography is or is not an art matters little. What is important is to distinguish between good and bad photography” (Modotti 196). Bad photography, of course, is the imitative kind she eschews in the early Pictorialists, while the good kind “takes advantage of the possibilities and characteristics the medium offers” (Modotti 197). What this means precisely for Modotti changes over time, as in her powerful closing paragraph she argues for the revolutionary capabilities of the camera, yet a few years later in her life, gives up art entirely to pursue the politics that will eventually send her into exile and then to death. But first, to *la revolucion*. Modotti writes: “Photography, precisely because it can only be produced in the present and because it is based on what exists objectively
before the camera, takes its place as the most satisfactory medium for registering
objective life in all its aspects, and from this comes its documental value” (Modotti 197).

This is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin’s 1935 argument that in the age of
mechanical reproduction we can use progressive arguments about art as “weapons” in
that they “brush aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius,
 eternal value and mystery” (Benjamin 218). Though Benjamin argues that reproduction
takes a work out of its historical context – as a copy of an image can be re-placed into
any future historical moment – he and Modotti would agree that the immediacy of the
photograph creates an authenticity that is unrivaled in previous artistic mediums. Modotti
takes this further by exploring, albeit in one or two sentences, the social implications of
this authenticity – particularly for the workers and the nation. In Modotti’s own words,
she argues that photography is an objective medium that forces us to stay in the present
moment and can thus be seen as the ideal tool for documenting the real. However, she
goes on to argue that this can take us only so far. She writes, “If to [documentary
photography] is added sensibility and understanding and, above all, a clear orientation as
to the place it should have in the field of historical development, I believe that the result
is something worthy of a place in social production, to which we should all contribute”
(Modotti 197). What, then, does Modotti intend to do with her camera – particularly
given her involvement in the Communist Party, her transnational and working-class
background, and her artistic sensibilities – to further “social production”?

For Modotti, a working-class aesthetic clearly involves many elements, namely, a
commitment to providing a visual representation of the people that values and witnesses
rather than subjugates and hides their real lives and their daily loyalty to their nation, its
politics, and the soul and emotions which fuel both. However, a class-consciousness driven aesthetic may indeed be at odds with the social realism Modotti used to harness the visual and artistic aesthetic that spoke so deeply to her and the *indigenismo* she was attempting to reflect back to Mexican nationalism.

For instance, Barbara Foley in *Radical Representation* argues that class is nothing but a social relationship built upon first acknowledging one’s class status in order to gradually and then finally to supersede it (x). Realism, it would seem, would support and promote the acknowledgment in part by exposing to the masses images of class status in order to instigate this consciousness and eventual revolution. By presenting personal portraits, from Lange’s *Migrant Mother* to Modotti’s *Hands* series, we are given no option to look away and disregard the exploitation and devastation of capitalist economics on individual lives. However, as Foley also notes, “Realism promotes asocial and ahistorical conceptions of personal developmental by fetishizing *character* as a function of intrinsic ‘traits.’ Selfhood is presented not as a product of social relations, but as an emanation of *a priori* identity” (Foley 254). This, then, leads us to a paradox: how do we read the propaganda-esque individual and social realist documentary photographs as revolutionary and class conscious – which requires a social element in order to sustain a class-driven revolution of community workers – while simultaneously understanding realism’s role in fetishizing individuals who are “posed” outside of social relations and therefore denied an identity in that class-consciousness effort?

In part Modotti reconciles this with her belief in the social function of art and in her utilization of *indigenismo* – arguably a national driven effort which also fetishizes the Native for political ends – but which necessarily requires the stability of their traditional
identity. The problem, ironically, with the *indigenismo* movement is that by heralding the Native as representative of the “real” Mexico, the Native then is dragged into the capitalist system (by a pro-United States Mexican government) in order to, ironically, promote and incite revolution against a Western notion of a national identity. How, then, did Modotti come to rationalize her involvement in such ironies and paradoxes? What part did her photography play in the nationalism and capitalism of the revolutionary movement, and, how do we best read her personal aesthetic as both classed and gendered when those terms become weighted with so much political and social baggage?

What I hope to acknowledge, with all of the above issues and contradictions, is how a realist aesthetic side-steps many of these issues and returns images to art without sacrificing either their artistic merit or their political importance. In particular, it is Tina Modotti’s working class and gender aesthetic that so poignantly realizes the verisimilitude of art, the capabilities of the camera, and the possibilities of social realism, in order to provide a transnationally recognized new perspective. As Octavio Paz once wrote about Mesoamerican art: “The work of art is a medium, an agency for the transmission of forces and powers that are sacred, that are other. The function of art is to open doors that lead to the other side of reality” (Paz 40).
In Mexico, and for Modotti, the Modernist era could be represented by two extremely different movements, both of which attempted to capture “the other side of reality” by showing the artistic, political, and national minds of their time: the Movimento Estridentistas and the indigenismo movement.

The Estridentistas (The Strident Ones) were a group of artists whose artistic mission tied them to the Italian Futurists, and whose mission was to denounce the bourgeoisie, the formulaic boundaries of the Academy, and instead herald a modernist aesthetic of the beauty of the machine era (Lowe 25). The Estridentistas believed in the grit and grime and metallic taste of the urban and the technological. The advent of the modern era meant money, from the oil industry among other capitalist ventures, and more opportunities for the disenfranchised Mexican worker to “climb the ladder of success.”
Modotti’s images from her time spent with the Estridentistas “imbued her photograph[s] both with ideological content and with humanity” (Hooks, Phaidon 56).

The Estridentistas were a radically politicized movement that also meant to embody the reclassification of socioeconomics. They called for the middle-class intellectuals to “emulate the spirit of revolt embodied in the Mexican Revolution” (Unruh 7). The Estridentistas were a transnational movement in that they connected themselves to the Bolsheviks and looked to the States’ utilization of industrialism. Vicki Unruh in Latin American Vanguards writes that they had international political affinities, but also saw “their cultural project as an extension of the [Mexican] revolution’s activist spirit” (15). A decade earlier, these beliefs, these countries, these intentions would be seen as
counter and contradictory, but as a wholly modernist enterprise, the technological, transnational and the indigenous could be combined with little tension and conflict. Modotti connected to this sense of fluidity. She indulged in the long nights of carousing and small gallery shows the Estrenistas held at Café de Nadie (Nobody’s Café). Margaret Hooks notes that Modotti’s work at this time, such as Telephone Wires and Tank No. 1, show a “modern, geometrical influence of the kind exhibited in the Estridentistas” (Hooks Tina Modotti 101). They also show the narrative of the Native-Mexican worker climbing the “ladder of success” – an American ideology if ever there was one – in order to achieve success through the bourgeois and capitalist oil economy not through revolution, all of which is the philosophy of the Estridentistas. This was still at a time when Modotti followed Edward Weston’s lead more than her own, yet she was developing her sense of artistic intentions and meeting with the Estridentistas and connecting psychologically and artistically to their political movement allowed her to begin to shape her own politicized aesthetic, far removed from Weston’s Pictorialism.

Counter to the Estridentistas’ modernist, pro-industry movement, was the indigenismo movement heralded by the Mexican government and upheld by the state-sponsored images of Diego Rivera and Alfaro Siqueiros. Rick Lopez argues in the comprehensive anthology on Mexican nationalism, The Eagle and The Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940, that the “turn toward an ‘ethnicized’ or ‘Indianized’ definition of Mexico’s national culture did not flow inevitably out of Mexico’s historical experience, as is generally assumed, but instead resulted from a distinct movement led by cosmopolitan nationalists inside and outside the government” (23). The government sanctioned movement of indigenismo can most simply be defined
as a “valorization of indigenous cultures” (Vaughn and Lewis 4). It was a complex ideology wrought with fetishizing, racialization, romanticization, and the perpetuation of poverty, negotiated by both the Mexican government and the great artists of the time.

In the 1930s, Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio heralded *indigenismo* as the great equalizer of Mexican national identity and as a kind of cure-all for the separatism of the racialized and classed divisions in the country. Claudio Lomintz in *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism* writes that “Gamio developed an *indigenismo* that dignified Mexican Indian features and blood, thereby paving the way for the Mestizo to emerge as the protagonist of national history” (53). And while this may sound lovely, it was far from simple. Producing and re-producing such racialized bodies for the sake and beautification of the Mexican nation meant idealizing a whole population of peoples that lived – in reality – most often in abject poverty and who were completely marginalized from the dominant, legalized, and accepted citizenry and society. So the question then became for the Mexican government, how do we valorize an entire group of people we have neglected and shunned for the last 500 years? In part this was done through the artists of the era. Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, Dr. Atl, and Alfaro Siqueiros were more than ready to paint murals of the Indians who ironically enough did not even feel welcome enough in town to view their own “portraits.”

Counter to this, Modotti’s classed and gendered work dialogues with *indigenismo* in multiple ways – particularly how the nation utilized women’s bodies in the re-production of indigenous-ness – but first is the often neglected class dialogue inherent in Mexican *indigenismo* and the ways Tina Modotti’s working-class aesthetic combated the popular nationalist movements.
A working-class aesthetic rests solely on the realization of the importance and impact of socioeconomic class on the psychology, expression, well-being, and basic human development of an individual and thereby his/her whole nation. A working-class aesthetic utilizes class as an active component in the representation, dissemination, and dialogue of class in the individual’s and nation’s very existence. This is clearly seen in Modotti’s *Poverty and Elegance*. It is not simply the juxtaposition of the working-class versus the upper-class that makes this image powerful, it is the dialogue that is established through the very real destitution of the individual positioned beneath the non-real, consumable image of the upper-class ideal. A working-class aesthetic, then, promotes the depiction of lower socioeconomic groups in order to give voice and movement to an otherwise silenced and often immobile population.
Modotti’s particular use of realism and social documentary photography is in revolutionary opposition to the national movement of *indigenismo* and the ways that this movement relied heavily, if not exclusively, on the romanticization of the Other, the softened gaze of Pictorialism, and, in order to accomplish both of these, the abdication of the dark, the dirty, the real, and the political complicity it takes to achieve such levels of poverty and degradation. Modotti’s *Hands* series embodies the intention of using aesthetics as a revolutionary tool of, as she names it, “social production.”

Image 9: [Untitled; Feet in Sandals]. 1927.

In *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*, Janet Zandy argues for many elements that allow for the identification of a working class text (and I will extend the definition of “text” to include photographs as well.) Primarily a working-class text is constituted by a text which is centered in the lived and material working-class experience,
and one that accurately represents the working-class way of being so that working-class people can see themselves mirrored back in a way that the dominant discourse has never imaginatively or realistically done. Zandy further argues that this representation is done through key aesthetic elements including a language of grief and suffering, loneliness and community, agency and picking sides in a fight, and often a bawdy if not direct and challenging sense of humor (Zandy 90-92).

Hands have long been a symbol of workers’ movements all over the world. From the Black power fist to the clenched fist inside the symbol for women, the hand is a symbol of freedom from the oppression of -isms. This may spring in part from workers’ reduction to “hands” of labor, as simple tools for owners’ production: “My hand will do the labor.” From the unblemished and manicured hands of the white-collar worker to the callused and sentient hands of the “field hand,” hands become an immediate marker of class almost as visibly and thoroughly as skin color inevitably cries out one’s race.

The depth and receptivity of Modotti’s *Hands* series allows viewers to become engaged in the work of the men photographed through delving into the calluses, the wrinkles, the dirt-encrusted fingernails; we, as viewers are invited to grip the handle of the tool, we too rest one hand self-assuredly atop the other. We are, as Raymond Williams has named it, inside the “structures of feeling and experience” in the text. Williams defines the “structures of feeling” as the “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt…[the] affective elements of consciousness and relationships.” Zandy elaborates Williams’ point by explaining that we, as viewers, have an intimacy with the text because of the power of the sensory detail (89). Modotti’s power as a realist and documentary photographer often rests not only in the details she painstakingly elucidates, but also because of the narrative she inscribes onto the image through sensory experience. This emotionality is accomplished – in contrast to Pictorialism’s sentimental and falsely structured emotionality – through straight photography’s use of detail and close-up framing, and Modotti’s utilization of sensory experience, the “structures of feeling,” the ways we touch each other, touch the tools of labor, and purposefully do not reach out to the viewer.
Modotti’s unique realism is in part created because these portraits have no faces, no full bodies attached; they do not need to. The portrait is of the hands themselves, just as the narrative is to expose how the laboring body has no face or voice in society. *Hands of the Puppeteer* is one of the most profound portraits that Modotti executed on the relationship of nature, labor and aesthetics, and even the beginnings of her gender aesthetic. The individual here is literally tied to his labor in that he is a puppeteer entangled in his own labor’s tool. As an individual he is alone in his web, but as an image and text the representation of him becomes part of a collective struggle to disengage from
that which binds him. “The laboring body speaks the language of fatigue and frivolity, of sacrifice and shared experience…Bodies also contain an assemblage of familiar and inherited postures…Bodies also carry memory” (Zandy 4). It is this which indigenismo could never withstand. There is a laboring, a memory held within the body that the political ideology could never romanticize around. The body never forgave the mind’s complicity. This becomes, then, Tina’s revolutionary moment in countering the nationalistic-driven indigenismo movement: to not romanticize the worker and his labor, but to show his very real participation in society.

Image 12: Labor 1 or Hands Washing. 1927.

In conjunction with a class aesthetic is always a gender narrative, as turn of the century labor is always divided along gender lines. Modotti’s artistic sensibility knew the
two were inseparable, so that when she ventured into the streets to capture labor issues, she inevitably began to communicate about a gender aesthetic as well.

Laura Mulvey writes that there are only “two choices open to the woman spectator: either to take the place of the male or to accept the position of male-created seductive passivity and the questionable pleasure of masochism” (qtd. in Nochlin 30). I would argue that by the 1930s, Tina Modotti had found a “third space.” Most often in depicting men, Modotti’s angle is one from above, a spying interloper position that keeps her an outsider to some degree, though close enough that she is no mystery, she is no passive spectator, nor does she sacrifice her female perspective to passively secure machismo.

In *Mexican Peasants Reading* El Machete, we glimpse into the shared collective consciousness of the rural peasants, communally reading the local political paper. Modotti’s privileged and watchful glimpse is over their shoulders, over their hats even. She is not one of them in their crowd; she is not reading the paper just behind their shoulder, leaning on their backs for support. She peers over a balcony, so far above that all she can see is the tops of their hats, their faces shadowed and swallowed by the brims. The focus is on the class and gender narrative, that they are peasants, that they are men, and that they are collectively reading this political newspaper. They are as actively engaged in their work as Modotti is in hers.

One of the most startling differences between male and female aesthetics, as represented by Modotti, is that the men are often pictured together, in groups and engaged in some literary or political act; the women, on the other hand, are often pictured alone or solely with a child, that is, in motherhood, which becomes synonymous with womanhood. There is a stillness represented by the women, a moving, comforting, embracing kind of stillness. In stark contrast is the movement, and the activity of the men, their community, their camaraderie. This over-the-shoulder camera angle, this perspective, is absent completely from the photos Modotti takes of women. Her female-centered photos are all on the level, they are tight in, and close up on an intimate and equal plane. To that end, Modotti begins her journey into a feminist aesthetic at a very specific locale, in her life and geographically: Tehuantepec, just after her acquittal of the murder of her lover, Julio Antonio. The images she captures of these women are confrontational, somewhat severe at times, and wholly familiar. These images are a shift from her gender aesthetic where she captures both the masculine and feminine and the
interplay and co-creation of the two. In her feminist aesthetic Modotti fully confronts the appropriation and re-production of women, their bodies, their national idealization, and their images.

The following images are fierce examples of the Tehuantepec culture that Modotti fell in love with. Tehuantepec is a matriarchal culture, and a very traditional one. Hooks notes that “Many of Mexico’s artists and writers admired the *Tehuanas*, and used images of them in their work as representations of an authentic, uncowed pre-hispanic culture. Several of these intellectuals also adopted their traditional Zapotec clothing, most notable among them the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo” (Hooks *Phaidon* 100). Modotti, however, rather than simply dress the part, identified with these women so completely that she and her images embraced them tightly. She almost exclusively photographed women and their children while she was on this trip, and it had a profound impact on the restoration of her sense of self.

*Mother and Child, Tehuantepec* is the quintessential glimpse at Modotti’s feminist aesthetic. The mother’s face is outside the camera frame completely, just as the child’s face is turned inward towards the mother enough that we cannot see him or her either. The focus of the image then becomes solely about their bodies and the narrative their physical interaction and positions tell us. The baby’s open legs, wrapped around the mother’s hip, are in contrast to the mother’s tightly wrapped arm, which cuts across the meridian of the frame – both are embracing and being embraced tightly – but in opposite ways. Similarly, the child’s loose, chubby skin folds in juxtaposition to the mother’s taut, muscular arm clutching the child’s mid-section. The mother’s very pregnant belly becomes almost an after-thought to the image, as it is so hidden by the naked child;
however, the image is not the same without it. In part this is due to the rounded belly’s aesthetics but more importantly its politics.

Artistically, Modotti’s use of line and form is exquisite, sensual, feminine, and wholly strong. Politically, this image becomes a part of a much larger conversation in the politics of feminist aesthetics, insofar as nationally there is an appropriation of women’s bodies in the re-production of indigenous images as well as the literal reproduction of national bodies, which Modotti is attempting to countermand.

Image 15: Baby Nursing. 1927.

Modotti’s feminist vision of Mexican women can only be explained through a dialogue with both Western constructions of womanhood and Mexico’s creation of indigenismo. Patricia E. Johnson in Hidden Hands: Working-Class Women and Victorian Social-Problem Fiction details the Western conceptions of womanhood when she
explains that throughout the history of literature, the working-class female is positioned as, on the one hand, a “sentimental, pathetic victim, who becomes politically significant only if she inspires male action.” And on the other hand, degraded working-women “are a larger pattern that uses monstrous, sexualized working-class women as emblems of ultimate social chaos” (Johnson 3). The true and real woman, literature and art has always told us, means that one embodies virginal etiquette, a Madonna-like adherence to motherhood and wifehood, and she encapsulates all that is pure, regal, comforting, and austere. She is the home, the hearth and the private, in response to the marketplace, the workplace, and the public. Working women, then, become a contradiction of risk, of overlap, and of the danger of loss. The eroticization and sentimentalization of the working woman then seems the only recourse to her otherwise ignored and silenced position in the construction of the industrial nation and renaissance of cultural modernism (Johnson 5).

Modotti upends this Western, colonized version of womanhood (as seen earlier in Kaseiber’s Blessed Art Thou Among Women) by re-appropriating the indigenismo of Mexico (a gender aesthetic rife with its own complications and overlays of nationalism and sentimentality). In Mexico’s post-revolution space, the government was attempting to erase its past of race and class hierarchies by appropriating the image and the idea, of the mestizaje (referring to Indian-Hispanic crossings) to become the leading icon of the new, modern, “integrated,” and thereby democratic in some way, nation. “The mixed-race individual would come to serve for many as a symbol of racial and therefore national unity” and this is particularly true for the women as they are the “producers of racialized
bodies” (Hedrick 4-5). This was accomplished through the artists of the day propagandizing such images in their art, particularly in publicly displayed murals.

Tace Hedrick in *Mestizo Modernism: Race, Nation, and Identity in Latin American Culture, 1900-1940* explains that

The land was often metonymically associated with the familiar images of the mother and the Indian. But these mothers and Indians (often Indian mothers) needed to be brought into allegorized and imaginative harmony with an idealized, modern, worker-state romance...The more generalized figure of the dark-skinned woman could easily be factored into the family-state’s vision for the future in terms of her child-bearing capacity; at the same time, she could do double duty by providing in herself an allegory of domesticity: she symbolized the very first unity of the nation-to-be, through the bringing-together within her own body of the Hispanic and the Indian to produce the mestizo subject. (121-22).

Modotti countermands this allegorical use of the Indian mother as subject position and national symbol by showing her in her daily life and work, so that instead of being the Angel in the House of Mexico, she becomes her own autonomous and laboring/co-creating woman. By de-mythologizing the indigenous woman, Modotti removes her from the pedestal of Indigenous Mother who is to reproduce a racialized nation, and also removes her from subject position of Worker who is forcefully used to co-construct the literal post-war nation and the romanticized ideology of modern Mexico as a nation built upon the backs of the *mestizaje*. 
Modotti’s realist portraits “demystify the discourses of visual imagery” as well as women’s only role in society (Nochlin 33). While Tina’s favorite imagery is of a woman holding a baby, she also has multiple portraits of women working. Depicting women in various roles helps to complicate and demystify women’s work as singular as her personhood becomes fleshed out in multiple images. In *Woman Carrying Jecapixtle Gourd, Tehuantepec* we see a woman traditionally dressed, carrying a highly stylized and decorated gourd. This woman very casually balances and barely holds onto the stylistically decorated gourd atop her head. Her gaze is one of unpremeditated elegance and pride. This is one of the few direct portraits Modotti allows us to see, and in this case, the poignancy of the image rests not in her personal portrait and its attendant mythologization, but in the woman’s bent arm, her elongated neck, the balancing act of her labor, and the interplay of pattern and texture between the gourd and her attire. It is
labor, and it is feminine without being reductive to either regionalist sentimentality or a
gendered conception of class narratives.

To return to the arguments of Paula Rabinowitz, realism is co-created through its
social relationships. This, as Modotti so deftly depicts, is contingent upon these women,
their labor, and their re-production of cultural traditions, and not simply social mores or
stereotyped gender roles. What “saves” Modotti’s co-construction of these women and
the real is because she does not fetishize either the feminine or the work of these women
at their labor. Women’s labor – labor that is either in birth or in work – becomes her own
individual contribution to the “social production” of her community and herself not her
nation or her government. She is not being determined by anything except herself in that
precise moment and this is the essence of the real as captured by Modotti’s photographs.

Image 17: Woman with Olla. 1926.
How, then, does Modotti create a gendered aesthetic without mythologizing what became a national symbol: the Native woman? How does she sustain the real? In *Woman with Olla* (1926), we are immediately drawn to Modotti’s signature artistic use of detail and shape. The luminescent water cascading down the water jar is in stark contrast to the linear lines of her bent elbow and the weight and burden she must bear to carry the water. Her labor is not romanticized but rather juxtaposed with the aesthetics of the moment, the tool of her labor, the *olla*. As with the *Hands* series, the individual’s face is not shown, symbolizing the moment, the precise action, the emotion of the detail, rather than the subject’s personal narrative and how it dialogues with her larger national discourse. The *olla* could stand for the Mexican nation, it could be the woman’s identity in a modern world balanced precariously yet securely on this woman’s back. Yet, for Modotti, the image really seems to be about how resplendent the *olla* looks and how capable and easeful this woman is who is carrying it. It is reality; it’s a moment not a lifetime. And this is exactly why it is representative of Modotti’s radicalism, realism, and revolutionary use of aesthetics.

Anita Brenner once said that Tina’s photography had a quality of “mystic radicalism” about it (qtd. in Hooks *Tina Modotti* 133). And in this case, “mystic” should erase the power of its realism, but somehow it doesn’t, it just seems to heighten it. Modotti is radical always in her ability to expose normative gender performances and awaken a class consciousness in everyone, including herself. So much so, in fact, that she surpassed both the generic conventions and limitations of her era including
sentimentalized photographic theory and the bourgeois societal dictates about what “high art” should and should not be. Further, she transcended even the national dictates of both Mexico and the United States about what should or should not constitute the national art, imagery, aesthetics, and identity. And then Modotti felt she had to renounce it all in order to pursue politics and social justice in the trenches.

When Lotte Jacobi, a fellow photographer, found Modotti in Germany in 1932, she asked Tina how she could abandon her art, her camera, her “life,” Tina simply replied: “I cannot use the camera when there is so much work to be done” (qtd. in Constantine 172). Apparently, all the realism in the world could not compensate for the arrests, the murders, and the social injustices that daily plagued Modotti’s life. “Work” suddenly did not include her camera-work, and art was no longer labor.

Modotti’s relinquishment of art does not negate the philosophical or revolutionary impact that she had on photography. The way that she embraced her subjects, their daily lives, and their co-construction of a modern Mexican identity, does not lessen. In her depiction of working-class and indigenous women and men, Tina Modotti argued against an entire country and its philosophy of itself. Further, she argued against the world’s conception of working-class men and women and the ways that they too can contribute to art when given the voice and a moment. Modotti’s gender and class aesthetic is revolutionary – even more than the Revolution, really – because it allows us to change how we see a working class text, a woman’s body, an indigenous culture, and a nation’s concept of itself.

Modotti’s tombstone, located in the Pantheon de Dolores in Mexico, has an image of her in profile, along with the dedicating words of Pablo Neruda:
Perfect your gentle name; perfect your fragile life
Bees, shadows, fire, snow, silence, and foam
Combining with steel and wire and pollen to make up
your firm and delicate being.

(qtd. in Constantine190).

Modotti, like the people in her photos, are memorialized not in ethereal images but are all
very much real, remembered and fully embodied.
CHAPTER III
‘THE REALEST REALITY’: MARIA IZQUIERDO, MEXICANIDAD, AND THE AESTHETICS OF NATION AND SELF

Maria Izquierdo’s work has been heralded throughout Mexico, from the 1920s until now, as “fundamentally Mexican.” Many implied that she was the quintessential representative of the indigenous (qtd in Zavala 70). Diego Rivera, when critiquing all the Mexican artists, even went so far as to say of her Esto es lo unico, “This is the only one” (qtd in Ferrer 10). What is most striking about these characterizations, however, is that while they parallel exactly what the Mexican government wanted post-revolution art to represent, Izquierdo’s work ultimately stands in direct contrast to the nationalistic fervor, patriarchal structures, and race and gender essentializations that the government and the muralists were enacting. While the Obregon and Vasconcelos run government wanted to iconize the Indian as representational of the true spirit of Mexico, and the artists of the day used women’s bodies as a canvas to explore the land and the nation, Maria Izquierdo’s “indigenous” paintings actually challenged most of these notions. By challenging the ideology of the government and the muralists, and instead creating her own self-determined identity, championing the everyday life of the individual through depicting retablos, de-racializing her figures, de-mythologizing the labor of the peasants, and emphasizing the Mexican woman’s body in a way that engaged the real, she becomes an artist championing an indigenous- and feminist- centered Mexicanidad based upon the aesthetic of the individual not a political agenda. In short, as Octavio Paz once declared: “Maria Izquierdo or the realest reality: not that of history but that of legend” (265).

According to Elizabeth Ferrer in “A Singular Path: The Artistic Development of Maria Izquierdo,” Izquierdo lived a typically monotone life throughout her childhood. Her way of being was dictated by her austere grandparents, mass at the Catholic Church, and traditional gender and class roles. This was all further solidified by her arranged marriage at 14 years of age (Ferrer 10).
Her husband, an army colonel, continued the dreariness of her childhood, the only element breaking the long passages of silence were the births of her three children. A shining light, however, was when the family moved to the cosmopolitan and bustling metropolis of Mexico City in 1923. This was a revelation to Izquierdo: the fashion, the art, even just the myriad of noises and the colors; it must have been the catalyst, the point of no return. Izquierdo left her husband in 1927, and “committing herself to becoming a serious artist, she enrolled in the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1928,” when Diego Rivera was its director (11). Izquierdo became the belle of the ball, throwing infamous parties, rooming with Lola Alvarez Bravo – the only two female artists living independently from men, surviving on their art and moxie – and participating as an active member in the Liga de Escritores y Artistas Revolucionaries (League of Revolutionary Writers and Artists) (Ferrer 13). Within all of this socializing and revolution, Izquierdo's art became a central focus of a larger debate in the art world and in Mexican political ideology.

By 1929, Izquierdo was partnered with Rufino Tamayo, who was “as familiar with the School of Paris and modernist trends in New York as with Mexican muralism and the cultures of Mesoamerica’s pre-Columbian peoples” (Ferrer 11). Izquierdo and Tamayo both had a philosophical ideology about art that they shared fiercely, and interestingly, it went against Diego Rivera and almost everyone else in the Mexican arts scene at the time. In late 1928, Tamayo explained his artistic practice as: “’my painting tends towards pure art. Not a systematized post-Cubist purism, nor a simply intuitive surrealism. Sensitivity and intelligence together’” (qtd. in Debroise 57). Going even further than the boundaries of specific genres, Izquierdo and Tamayo believed that art must inspire, and that it must speak to every viewer universally through its poetics. Tamayo also stated in 1928 that “’Mexicanism has been interpreted only folklorically and archeologically, having more to do with anecdote than essence’” (qtd. in Zavala 71). Tamayo and Izquierdo wanted to depict that essence, and they believed that that was accomplished through a
kind of universalism, the poetics of the Classicists and the Romantics that for them supersede race, class, gender, and national boundaries.

This flew in the face of everything that the social realists, like Diego Rivera and Tina Modotti, or the anthropology of Anita Brenner, were attempting to accomplish. They believed in speaking to the illiterate masses of Mexico through images that captured the real, could convey a truth, could uplift and revolutionize an entire country. Izquierdo, on the other hand, “was uninterested in developing a sense of realism in her works. Favoring spontaneity over painterly refinement, she directed her artistic investigations toward invention and the transformation of the commonplace into a poetic metaphor for human existence” (Ferrer 12). Ironically enough, Izquierdo and her surrealism and Tina Modotti and her social realism are not that far apart: both women utilized the commonplace in order to express an elevated sense of depth and aesthetics, as well as explore deeper truths. While the two women and their genres could not be more different, each served a unified and purposeful look at their own gender and class identity and how it relates to the Mexican ideology of the era. It becomes, then, only a very fine line between where realism and surrealism may meet; it was not the intention that separated them, it was only the politics.

Izquierdo and her art became the principal representative in the crossroads between Rivera and the social realists on one side and the modern and poetical on the other. As Adriana Zavala notes in her essay “Maria Izquierdo,” Rivera was virulently homophobic, patriarchal, abusive of the officializing image of Indians, and since he was often paid by the government for his nationalistic murals, biased and had little to do with the real Mexico or real Indians (69). When Izquierdo chose to distance herself from Rivera and the dominant discourse
of the era, there were repercussions politically, artistically, and personally. In Rivera’s opinion, Izquierdo went from being “the only one” who could depict indigenous Mexico to being an outsider that was removed from realist ideology and “revolutionary” Mexican politics. Their relationship was completely dissolved when, in the 1940s, Izquierdo was contracted to be the first Mexican woman to paint a government sponsored mural. This artistic and feminist triumph quickly dissolved when Rivera all but fired her, saying she didn’t have the technical abilities to handle it, and took over the commission himself just days before she was to begin. This was beyond disheartening for Izquierdo, who later wrote that Rivera’s co-opting of the mural and diminishing of her abilities was a “great crime” (qtd. in Ferrer 27). This severed her relationship with the social realists and muralists once and for all.

While the muralists were clearly tied to politics and power in Mexico, there were other groups that existed in opposition, namely, the Contemporaneos group. The Contemporaneos believed that the “new art” of Mexico should be urban, modern, imaginative, international and universal. They were led by a group of writers who voiced their opposition to the art of the era through their magazine *Contemporaneos* (1928-31). Many of the Contemporaneos were considered to be from marginal populations – men who were gay, women like Izquierdo who were single and/or divorced – and they believed in uniting under more cosmopolitan banners such as creative expression rather than political slogans. They also wanted to harness in the influx of Western money to create an artistic world not be subjected to its whims and fads. “The Contemporaneos realized that the new forms of capitalism could create a massive middle class that could spend money and time for their own enlightenment and to give meaning to their leisure” (Oropesa xiï). Izquierdo’s middle class background was compelled by this vision, and she too wanted to create a substantial and sustaining artistic community not just an artistic-political moment. She also agreed with the Contemporaneos group that it was not right to equate Mexican art with “an overt celebration of ‘race’ and with the politically homogenizing historical narratives.
of the muralists” (Zavala 68). Izquierdo’s connection to the Contemporaneos group did not last long, as she must not have felt the need to go from being the icon for Rivera’s “true Mexican woman” to then being the icon for the Contemporaneos and the modern, urban and emancipated; either way, she was still being claimed as someone else’s.

Above all else, though, the man who claimed her most famously was Antonin Artaud, the French theater director, playwright, and art critic. He once said, “‘I came to Mexico searching for indigenous art, not the imitation of European art. But imitations of European art in all forms abound, while truly Mexican art cannot be found. Only the painting of Maria Izquierdo gives off an inspiration that is truly Indian’” (qtd in Ferrer 16). So that while Artaud wanted to elevate Maria above the Muralists, he ended up reducing all involved. This idealizing of Maria’s work as representing a whole nation of indigenous peoples results in essentializing Maria’s work and her figures and displacing any realism and authenticity that the work may hold.

Artaud is said to have “discovered” Izquierdo (just as Andre Breton is said to have “discovered” Frida Kahlo), and he connected her “primitivism” with the national efforts of the day in a way that attempted to make it superior to realism. He said in a 1937 essay that accompanied her work in a gallery show in Paris, that she was “‘an indigenous Mexican, and that her paintings exemplified a superior expression of reality that was found both in dreams and the primitive mind; the basis of this reality was metamorphosis’” (qtd in Geis 3). By prioritizing the reality that her “primitivism” elucidated for him and the international artistic community, Artaud is furthered the nationalist agenda of Mexico that idealized the Native, and, further, then made this essentialized version of the Native more real than the reality of the Native him or herself. As he prioritized his own interpretation of the Native and his/her culture over the Native him/herself, he thereby made the national and ideological trope of the Native – the official version of indigenismo – more authentic than a real person. This had a profound impact sociologically, as
audiences could then focus on a painted image hung in a city gallery and leave feeling full of visions of Indians, while an actual Native person starved ten miles away.

Yet this kind of reality-check was not in Artaud’s oeuvre. He stated that because Izquierdo could convey both dreams and the primitive, Native/Indian mind, her reality’s state of being was one of metamorphosis: “‘the shapes of objects sprout out and join their singular properties with properties of all other objects. The objects don’t form the real, but are in the real, traveling…exchanging their strengths from one to the other’” (qtd in Geis 3). Artaud is not only asserting that Izquierdo creates a reality more real than the Native, but that in her depictions she surpasses the reality of the Indian, causing a kind of transcultural transcendence.

Artaud saw Izquierdo as a kind of oracle, channeling a “buried indigenous consciousness” which was giving voice to an archaic and almost divine voice (Geis 6). This exoticizing and Otherizing of both the Indian and of Izquierdo was not completely repelled by her, as she did “perform” a specific image of traditional Mexico through her clothing and jewelry that she wished to be represented by and identified with. However, being both an outsider as a non-political, non-identified Surrealist and simultaneously heralded as an insider and the “true Mexican spirit” caused its own tensions. Terri Geis writes, “the naïve quality of [Izquierdo’s] painting, originally intellectually and ideologically conceived by Izquierdo as a means of expressing an authentic Mexican identity, was reconfigured by [a New York art collector] as a raw expression of some unmediated, irrepressible state” (Geis 10). In this way, Izquierdo became aligned with the Surrealists whether she wanted to or not because of a certain automatism-like quality that Artaud saw in her work and channeling the subconscious – which in Izquierdo was thought to be the indigenous Indian. Izquierdo, therefore, not only engaged willingly or not in the dominant genres of her era but also became, both through the automatism of the genre and her
denial of allegiance to any movement, an icon for an independent modernism that was more real and Mexican than any reality of Mexico.

In 1938 the poet Rafael Solana wrote in the *Contemporaneos* journal that Izquierdo has “‘two primordial elements [that] characterize her work: femininity and Mexicanidad’” (qtd in Zavala 77). And Izquierdo engaged her *Mexicanidad* with the same depth but also hesitation as her depictions of the feminine. In part this is because she *could*; when Izquierdo was considered the “quintessential Mexican” and often upheld as the barometer of how women artists could be *more* Mexican, she had a free license to depict Mexico and Mexican women with as much fervor as she could muster. What she did with this power was to render a world as real and poetic as she could imagine. And in order to hold this space, Izquierdo avoided almost all things political, yet she did still wholly embrace the ideas behind *Mexicanidad* – defined as upholding all those elements that are “singularly Mexican – whether this be defined as cultural values, spiritual values, and even psychological attitudes” (Ferrer 17). Izquierdo herself said, ‘I strive to make my work reflect the authentic Mexico, which I feel and love. I avoid themes that are anecdotal, folkloric, and political because they do not have poetic or expressive strength, and I think that in the world of painting, a work is an open window to the human imagination.’ (qtd. in Ferrer 17).

It is, however, in her depictions of *retablos* that we see Izquierdo’s very folkloric quality abound, which is in no way diminishing of their realism and impact. They are, in fact, a kind of social realism unto themselves. Octavio Paz once said, “Maria’s realism is not realistic but *legendary*; by that I mean, it is an evocation, filtered through her sensibility, of her childhood and the rustic poetry of little towns and villages in Central and Western Mexico” (Paz 263). Izquierdo’s sense of self and her re-presentation of *Mexicanidad* is “filtered” through her
connection to the land (which she depicts often) and also her deeply emotional and social relationship to Mexican culture and life.

Izquierdo’s relationship to the feminine was also a complicated one. In particular, being a single mother to three children, newly divorced in 1928 in a Catholic nation, and trying to support herself as an artist, seems to have shaped her depictions of women. Elizabeth Ferrer has often characterized these female figures by their “pathos” and appearing “victimized” (Ferrer 15; 17). Ferrer attributes this to her break up with Tamayo and her single motherhood. She writes, “The personal difficulties [Izquierdo] faced during this period may have influenced her portrayal of women as weak, alone, and dependent, contradicting Izquierdo’s own position as an independent woman and artist” (16). I would argue instead that Izquierdo is depicting a societal condition of women as bound, rather than dependent, and that her sense of “victimization” is actually a representation of her own kunstlerroman and transformative process that at times simply illuminates darkness instead of light and the sometimes terrifying feelings of individuation; this in no way implies she or the women she paints are victims of anything other than their own process in an era that devalued such a sojourn. I argue this in part because of how Izquierdo herself describes her Self and her journey.

Izquierdo once wrote about her feminist beliefs that “I am not a feminist of the classical type; I am not one who believes that the future must be governed and managed only by women. Neither am I a feminist who hates men” (qtd in Ferrer 14). What Izquierdo struggled with was the idea of making her femininity or womanhood a political maneuver or position – just as she felt that Mexicanidad could be separate from Mexican politics – and she instead seemed to desire an identity based on her womanhood as she felt and depicted. She wrote that women – as uniquely female artists – “should have a broad spirit of self-criticism, a sense of struggle, and should never lose their femininity” (qtd. in Lozano 46-7). In this way, there is no disavowal of
femininity, just a realignment and redefinition centered solely on the internal rather than the external.

Octavio Paz describes Izquierdo as such:

She looked like a pre-Hispanic Goddess. A face of sun-dried mud perfumed with copal incense. Highly made-up, with cosmetics not at all up to date but age-old, ritual: lips like red-hot coals, cannibal teeth, wide nostrils to breathe in the delicious smoke of supplications and sacrifices, violently ocher cheeks, crow’s brows and enormous dark circles surrounding deep-set eyes. Her dress was equally fantastic: jet black and magenta fabrics, laces, buttons, amulets, ostentatious earrings, sumptuous necklaces…of Jaguar teeth…When I saw her, I thought: the only thing missing is for her to take an obsidian knife from her brassiere and cut out Juan Soriano’s heart. But that woman with the terrifying look of a pre-Hispanic goddess was gentleness herself. (Paz 249-50).

Maria made multiple self-portraits, and they take on a sense of political importance past their obvious Surrealist self-referentiality. The self-portrait is a powerful tool of feminism and autonomy, challenging the notion of woman as subject-model-object. Here we see that not only is Izquierdo in full control of her artistic prowess, but she is also her own master in deciding how her depiction will be captured and how her image will be disseminated. The fact that she most often chose to portray herself with an austere expression, in full traditional dress, and looking directly at the viewer implies that she is more than comfortable taking on such a position of authority and sovereignty. As Elizabeth Ferrer writes, “self-portraiture became a critical act of repositioning a longstanding artistic relationship – that of male painter and female model…. Izquierdo [was] wholly responsible for determining the mode by which her image was constructed” (22). She is in full command of her identity and her destiny. It is both particularly Mexican – in her choice of dress, makeup and jewelry – and also a highly intimate and personal space. There is a re-negotiation of the sense of the individual, as determined by her own sense of Mexicanidad and the feminine. This is an especially important realization of self-determination in light the tug-of-war over her identity and the surrounding political context of the era.

Izquierdo’s self-portraits are fully embodied; she is wholly her Self, her image, her chosen representation, and in this particular body. She could not be the same without all of these elements. Her retablos and still lifes, on the other hand, have no body present, so they become cultural explanations and critiques based solely on cultural objects. Further, they provide a specifically female identity without a female body. Continuing this in her surrealist works, there are often severed heads where no body is attached, or even bodies without their heads. There is displacement, confusion, a literal and emotional disembodiment of self/body/identity. All of these images in turn create a truly personal exploration of the self, as much as they dialogue with their unique context, inseparable from their Mexicanidad and all that the nation requires of its citizens.
Izquierdo’s *retablos* provide her with a strong and familiar connection to her Mexican heritage and identity as well as identify as a kind of realism but that is a more spiritual and cultural way of being. In *Viernes de Dolores* (Good Friday) we see the *retablo* of Dolores, and the individual’s altar. The Good Friday altar is ubiquitous all over Mexico, and even more elaborate ones becoming visible on the Friday before Palm Sunday, commemorating the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Dolores represents the Seven Sorrows that the Virgin Mary suffered. Mary in her deep grief takes on the persona of and becomes Dolores, the Lady of Sorrows. These paintings mirror the
cultural practice of creating retablos, which are small oil paintings of a particular saint, usually done on tin, zinc, wood or copper. It is a working-class version of the otherwise resplendent, gold icons and relics of the Church.

“Retablo” translates literally to “behind the altar” (echoing the title of Anita Brenner’s book). The retablo was the individual’s persona, affordable, travelling version of the church altar imagery. Izquierdo’s versions are larger, done in oils on stretched canvas; so they become a cross between a portrait and a retablo. In Viernes de Dolores we can see that this is not simply an icon meant for communication and consolation; it is instead a portrait of an already established altar. The offerings are there, the fresh fruit, the flowers, the flags of joy. Dolores in this case is simply the framed retablo propped against the back wall, the centerpiece of an exquisite altar, in turn framed again by translucent white curtains. It is one person’s altar, but that can be found in everyone’s home. Izquierdo’s repetitive depiction of Dolores represents not only her grief and its religious manifestation, but also her deep to connection to what is feminine, Mexican, personal, and also a ubiquitous image of the everyday reality for the soul of the individual.

In moving from Mexican mass culture to individual identity, we move from Izquierdo’s retablos to her still-lifes. Octavio Paz writes that Izquierdo’s portraits “show us not so much a person as an intimate relation. Mirrors, dressing tables, shelves, tables with vases of flowers or pieces of fruit, beds: ritual objects of an intimate, feminine religion. Pretty everyday things, simple or highly decorated, windows with curtains of violent or hot colors, forms and volumes linked to this world by an obscure desire to be and to last. A triumph of gravitation: to exist, merely to exist” (265).
They are frames littered with the accoutrements of the body – a lady’s gloves, her hat, a fan. They further provide clues to her identity in how she fills her home – an extension of her body – but without the actual physicality. Elizabeth Ferrer notes that Izquierdo uses her still lifes as self-portraits, stating that “Izquierdo used clothes and personal possessions to construct an image of female identity” particularly in the absence of a human body (19). Izquierdo’s still lifes of a woman’s boudoir or kitchen are most powerful because of what they leave out (the woman herself), but are even more powerful for how they imagine that woman to be, to exist, without the societal trappings she has left behind.

In *La raqueta*, and other still lifes, particularly *El velo de novia* The Bridal Veil (1943), there is suddenly a woman without her gloves, without her hat, without her pink mask, without her bridal veil and shoes; she is more free in our imagination, more raw, more naked and more her Self. And the only thing more intimate than a woman without her shoes, is a woman’s home altar.
In *La raqueta* (The Racquet) we see a vacant, almost bare room. There are bare walls, wood slats for a possible bed, a curtainless window. The background of cracked and decaying walls looms loudly of abandonment. Yet on the table – shoved severely into the middle foreground of the image – are the forgotten, random objects of one fleeing the dark and dusty room. It is a middle-class woman’s persona left behind; a tennis racquet and balls, an old megaphone, white gloves, a hairbrush, possibly a lipstick, and a pink mask. This middle-class imagery connects to the Contemporaneos conception of a middle-class artistic lifestyle and ontology filled with material objects and ideas of leisure and frivolity. It further speaks directly to Izquierdo’s aesthetic because it displays a version of Mexico that the Muralists would find counter-revolutionary; it is an everyday reality, a female reality. It is a display of a woman’s
modernity laid on the table of an otherwise abandoned Mexican shack. There is some identity Izquierdo is leaving behind or putting on display for the voyeurism of the audience. In contrast to this sense of loss, is the bounty that seems to be given to us in Naturaleza Viva.


In Naturaleza Viva, Still Life, Maria is imposing the ingredients of a woman’s kitchen table onto the base of the earth. We are cordoned off and contained by an overly imposing white wall on the right. Creating a severe depth of perspective, the wall allows us to remain with our bounty without interference. In the middle of an arid landscape, far from the empty houses that dot the horizon, and long before a barren tree, Izquierdo places offerings: genitalia-like fruit reminiscent of Georgia O’Keefe, red, overly ripe watermelon, a conch shell turned upwards and wide open for listening, an empty deep blue vase, a split open pomegranate begging both Eve and
Persephone to bite and to know, and in the foreground a single, whole white egg. It is an offering. It is where the feminine and the Mexican meet, at a crossroads between land and sky. And it needs no people.

In opposition to *Naturaleza Viva* we see in *La Tierra, Dolor* only the woman and none of the household trappings, middle-class accoutrements, or bounties of the earth. Here the woman is devoid of her food, her offerings, her home – she is simply offering herself; she is the *ofrenda*.


*La Tierra, Dolor* (The Earth, Pain) is part of the larger mural work that Izquierdo was commissioned to do, but which Diego Rivera later over-took. It was to be the first mural by a Mexican woman, and was to display all female figures as they embodied the fine arts and culture of Mexico. Izquierdo envisioned a mural employing allegorical images of women representing the arts, literature, painting, and music (Ferrer 27). There were social realist elements as well,
wherein women would depict the labor of Mexico and enact motherhood in a working-class context. It would have been a profound feminist statement, even if that wasn’t Izquierdo’s political intention. How she imagined and was going to depict women as and participatory in Mexican cultural life speaks volumes to both her political and feminist views, even if she declined to engage such ideas in other ways. In particular it was her notion of creating a mural which imagined women as both cultural muses and also workers that showcases not only Izquierdo’s complexity in conceiving of women, but also the multidimensionality that she wanted to bring to the national arts scene. In creating a public mural that utilized women’s multiperspectival gaze and existence, Izquierdo would have been challenging both the muralists’ one dimensional essentialization of Natives and the superficial perpetuation of women as objects or victims.

The fact that Rivera could profess Izquierdo the quintessential Mexican and then disavow her publically as incapable of creating a mural, exposes Mexico’s patriarchal structure and gender-based power struggles. This machismo has a long history: Jose Marti once famously said of South/Latin America that the United States “‘takes us for a kind of female of the American race’” (qtd. in Hedrick1). The Muralists easily embraced the view that “female” was less-than and perpetually inadequate and therefore felt that “the process of imagining national or socialist unification would have to start with imagining a modern, masculine self” (Hedrick 103). This tension illuminates exactly why Izquierdo disengaged from political maneuverings; the glass ceiling wasn’t a ceiling at all, but thick concrete walls surrounding her.

What stands, however, are some of the images that she intended to use – *The Earth, Pain*, being one of them. This image is haunting on its own, and even more so given its sociopolitical context. The figure cries out, deeply and prayerfully, with one hand to the earth and the other lifted up towards the sky, a fist of both power and pleading. The woman’s nakedness is barely covered by her draped headscarf. Her nudity is not the typical female nude of European
Classicism or the Romantic conflation of women’s bodies and an earth-bound fecundity. In employing European conceptions of the female body, Mexican muralists and the *indigenismo* movement in general conflated a woman’s body with the earth. Tace Hedrick in *Mestizo Modernism: Race, Nation, and Identity in Latin American Culture, 1900-1940*, argues that in Mexico “the land was often metonymically associated with familiar images of the mother and the Indian. But these mothers and Indians (usually Indian mothers) needed to be brought into allegorical and imaginative harmony with an idealized, modern, worker-state romance” (121-22).

This romanticizing of not only the Native female body but also of her class status and often government imposed poverty became the allegorical representation of the new Mexican nation, with all the problems and ironies that encompasses.

As a counter-discourse to this, Izquierdo depicts her Indian or Mexican females as a product of the earth, not the victim of it or an allegory for it. The figure in *The Earth, Pain* seems to be stripped bare out of necessity, her figure, depicted in thick brushstrokes and a textured use of paint, is disrobed by anguish and despair. Her nudity is this context, for Izquierdo, becomes not about innocence, exposure or sentimentality, but about vulnerability, rawness, and reality. In paralleling this woman’s despair with the earth’s, Izquierdo seems to be arguing for the ways in which Mexico has abandoned the true earth, *la tierra Mexicana*, for the West’s materialism and Europe’s artistic influences. Whatever may be the causes, the Mexican soil and Mexican woman are crying out, blatantly and unveiled.

In *Alegoria del Trabajo*, Allegory of Work (1936), we see many of the elements that Izquierdo is known for: a stark landscape, a female figure in an expression of despair, and columns dominating the atmosphere. As opposed to the implied oppression and patriarchy of *La Tierra, Dolor*, in *Alegoria del Trabajo*, the oppression becomes more implied, yet inseparable from the individual female’s physical reality and psychological process.
The central female figure in *Alegoria del Trabajo* is in an upright fetal position, covering her face with her hands in a sign of anguish and loss, maybe even shame. Her nude body is covered by her drawn up knees. There are pyramidal shapes of earthen reds and browns, made more vibrant by the white and tan mountains in the background. A gold streak of lightening crisscrosses the distant horizon, creating a sense of ferocity. Most striking are the looming legs, disembodied from any other body part or body at all, with a lunar solar system of moon and stars in a golden orb instead of genitals. While the moon could be read as female, and could imply female genitalia, the musculature of the legs is most often read by critics as masculine. Supporting this idea is the imposing two columns to the right of the legs, one standing upright and mirroring the phallic imposition of the legs, another fallen to the ground by the woman. Elizabeth Ferrer writes that Izquierdo’s use of column imagery comes from her time with Tamayo.
and the influence of di Chirico; she writes that Tamayo’s “compositions often included the motif of a fallen classical column, symbolizing the decline of European civilization” (Ferrer 24). If we read the columns as representing European civilization, and the legs as representing male dominance, then Izquierdo is telling us a narrative of women’s oppression by both the nation and by the patriarchal superstructures that uphold it. What is more interesting, though, is that Izquierdo’s primary focus is not on either of those issues, but on the woman herself and her process around reclaiming an identity that is neither European nor Indian, neither male determined nor societally conditioned.

The core of Izquierdo’s feminist aesthetic is that she is depicting the ways in which women negotiate the contexts and overlying social mores and structures that determine her. Yet this is not simply a politicized space for her, it is an emotional one. The title of this painting, Allegory of Work, begs us to see multiple meanings within the image. As Teri Geis asks, “What kind of ‘work’ is being undertaken here?” (6). The figure is not protesting on a picket line, nor is she at home burning down her kitchen; she is, instead, doing the “work” of being a woman in a nation and era that has no interest in female self-determination. Izquierdo is asking us not just to confront the physical structures that make the women cower, but to see that the work being done is emotional, psychological, physical, and spiritual. The female figures she creates are oftentimes covering their faces, and physically positioned to be in some kind of despair or cowering submission. What seems to be most often implied by this is how these women feel about their lack of agency against the structures that bind them. What Izquierdo is compelling us to view and internalize is the collective emotionality oppression causes in women.
One of the secondary ways that we can see Izquierdo focusing on women’s psychology more than trying to fight their politicized oppression is because she loathed the women that used their femaleness and intellectuality to get ahead. Izquierdo once commented during a radio presentation that she gave in 1939, entitled “Women and Mexican Art,” that these “pseudo-intellectuals” (her exact word was: intelectualoides) were very different from “authentic women.” Of the pseudo-intellectual women she said that “‘only the fact that they had been born women made them feel better than men’” (qtd. in Lozano 46). She goes on to state that:

‘They think that bragging out loud makes them better [than men]; but deep inside they still feel full of old prejudices and are just covering up with theatrical attitudes for their inferiority complex. I think feminists have not conquered anything for humanity nor for themselves, and instead of helping women grow (who for so many years have been slaves of everything) they get in the way of emancipation.’ (qtd. in Lozano 46).

Izquierdo did not want to conflate her sense of femininity with the politics of feminism. This is not to say that her work is not then feminist and accomplishing of political ends and powerful progress for the rights of women simply in their construction. It’s simply that Izquierdo’s intention was more personal than that; she wanted women to have the political freedom to choose their own destiny, to be able to have creative expression, and find their own identity. This could not be accomplished if they were being told how to be Mexican, how to be women, and how to model and perform their bodies. Revolution and progress begins with the individual and her process of envisioning and internalizing change. So in her work Izquierdo gave her women individual, real, naked bodies, even if the first act they “performed” on the canvas was to release the fear and anguish they had kept in so long; at least, for Izquierdo, this was authentic and might lead to their eventual “emancipation.”
One of the additional ways that Izquierdo challenges the political-feminism that uses women’s bodies as weapons against patriarchy, or the romanticized-feminism that keeps women as pedestal object/subject, is through her depiction of the female body in multiple genres and mediums. In particular, Izquierdo re-produces the Mexican woman’s body without reducing it to a reproductive body; furthermore, she inhabits an ethnicized space without reducing it to a racialized stereotype for nationalistic gain. Self-determination, for Izquierdo, is depicted in her realism through women’s oppression by their context, and with Surrealism through their own internal process.

The Mexican woman’s body that Izquierdo depicts is not representational, not a realist mimetic copy of all the images we have digested before of the brown body, and it is not a self-serving and escapist depiction of the Surrealists, it is instead an extension of herself, and is her rendition of the daily life of a Mexican woman as she sees and feels it. For instance, in *Madre Proletaria*, Proletarian Mother (1944), we see a mother with her teen daughter and young son, while the family dog is curled up asleep next to them; yet this is far from a family portrait that hangs lovingly in the living room. All three are positioned on the ground, the mother leaning onto the woven seat of a wooden chair. The expressions of the children are almost blank; the teen daughter stares somewhat vacantly off to the left of the viewer, limply holding a piece of string, while the young son stares directly at the audience – without challenge but with a directness that is unwavering – from the exact center of the frame. The mother’s bodily position is one of tiredness, sadness maybe. She holds the son on her lap and sits in front of the daughter with care and gentle protection, but she is also consumed with her own narrative, her “proletariat” context. She is in a no-man’s-land; there is no furniture to signal what room she is in, no art or photos on the walls to give cultural ambience or clues, no walls to give boundaries. There is only a chair, that no one claims to sit in, and a dog that is oblivious to its surroundings. The entire image is created through the three figures’ bodies. The mother, through her body position, tells us she can do no more than sit on the floor, holding her children, and be held by her context. The passivity of the image implies an exhaustion, a resignation to the bare room, walls, life.

Inherent through the title *Proletariat Mother*, are the inseparable characteristics of womanhood, in this case determined by motherhood, and labor, as both relate to working-class psychology. Gender and class become entwined not just through what we see in the image, but also what we don’t see. There is a lack of society, of connectivity in the image; the entire dialogue, being conveyed through the figures’ bodies and facial expressions, leads the viewer to
fill in empty spaces and unspoken words on their own. We have to fill in the blanks. This stands in stark contrast to *Maternidad*, Motherhood.

In *Maternidad* (1943), the viewer does not need any outside context, does not need to do any work to understand the image – it is all inherent in the societal and archetypal iconography. We see the Catholic rendition of motherhood, the sainted, virgin-mother, whose son does not glare confrontationally at the viewer this time, but instead simply gazes with love and adoration into the face of his sainted mother. We see a mother who, without the burden of class, without the crushing context of being the “proletariat mother” gets instead to be the virgin mother, the free and sainted mother.

![Image 25: Maternidad. Maternity. 1943.](image)

And she is unmistakably a Mexican mother as well. The dark skin, the angular nose, the deep set eyes. She is a realistic Virgin of Guadalupe; the perfectly acculturated icon of Mexicanism and Western idealized virtue. This portrait depicts a patriarchal – both societal and Church deigned –
version of motherhood and womanhood. While this image may be problematic for gender and postcolonial studies, it speaks volumes about who a mother could be without class crushing down on her; when she is sainted not suffocated.

In *Consolacion*, Consolation, we see many of these elements combined. First we notice the image is composed exclusively of women, and more specifically focuses entirely on the female body. To center these women and their bodies in Izquierdo’s *Mexicanidad* are the colors and techniques she employs: deep, dark, rich earth tones of jagged lines. Terri Geis writes that “Izquierdo painted *Consolation* in Mexico City during the period in which she was collaborating very closely with Rufino Tamayo. The two artists developed a technique using impasto-applied watercolor in tiny, vibrant brushstrokes to create a purposely naïve or even slightly crude effect” (3). The realism of the moment is solidified in depicting a space of raw emotional contact. The brushstrokes and even the artistic technology in general furthers Izquierdo’s feminist and working-class aesthetic because such texture and lines re-creates a woman’s body wholly anew as well as creates a specifically earth-bound, raw, and tangible real canvas.

Maria Elena de Valdes contextualizes this by writing in *The Shattered Mirror: Representations of Women in Mexican Literature* that “The domination of most Mexican women has a particular history which does not originate in the United States, but rather in Spain, and to a certain extent, in Rome. Spanish culture, with its entrenched Roman Catholicism and its seven centuries of Arabic-Muslim influence in Andalusia, implanted a foundation of sexual stereotypes which modern capitalism has used and developed” (15). Gender and class become inseparable, and so depictions of the indigenous woman and her body are engaged in a long historical discourse of conflict and redemption. Maria’s art then enters this discourse as a counter-dialogue to the standard and stereotyped images portrayed in popular media and instead reclaims a sense of femininity based on women’s sense of self – a wholly new reality and therefore realism – not based on their historical lineage, such as it is.
Consolacion depicts a nude woman, prostrate on the floor, being covered by another nude woman with a white sheet. The woman on the floor is almost in a position of giving birth, her legs bent, her hands covering her face. Yet there is no enlarged belly to signal birth from the body, so perhaps we could read her “birth” as more spiritual, self-contained, and transformational. To add to the spiritual component, an angel stands on the open window ledge, blowing a trumpet not onto the women, but directly onto the column that stands purposelessly in
the room. The use of the column, used to pedestal or uphold nothing, seems to be an imposing phallic (and Roman) gesture, a classically masculine reference, that directly or indirectly is causing an overbearing sense to the women, implying a masculine force causing discomfort or imposition to the women and their pain. This might lead us to believe that the angel as a spiritual element can overpower the patriarchal and therefore leave room for the women to tend to each other without the column’s masculinity to oppose them. It is one of many images that seems to speak directly to women’s pain and their ability to comfort or heal one another, with the help of divine intervention.

This image, among many of Izquierdo’s, is devoid of an actual male presence. What is exemplified here is the strong female presence, particularly the strong indigenous quality; this is the essence of Izquierdo’s Mexicanidad. When Antonin Artaud went so far as to say: “Unquestionably, Maria Izquierdo is in communication with the true forces of the indigenous soul” it solidified her position as an “oracle” of Mexicanidad (qtd. in Merida 84). Izquierdo’s Mexicanidad relies on a very realist understanding of the “indigenous spirit” as she interprets it. Her use of multi-ethnic skin tones is a case in point. Similarly, her renderings of the indigenous female body become not just counter but revolutionary contrasts to what the government and the muralists were doing. This may in part explain not only her disavowal of politics and a feminism that she thought would get her nowhere in the face of such overwhelming patriarchy, but also their disavowal of her. Izquierdo, in turn, kept to her own feminist aesthetic – albeit a feminism devoid of politics but clearly upholding a particularly female positionality and perspective – and Mexicanidad – that likewise removed politics from the nationalistic ideology and imbued it instead with her own direct, even aggressive, indigenismo. This can be most forthrightly seen in Prisoners (1936) and Dreams and Premonitions (1947).
The very raw emotions depicted by Izquierdo in *Prisioneras* encapsulates her realism, her *Mexicanidad*, and her feminism. The European and/or phallic columns are not idle decorations, as in some of her other images, but instead an active and deliberate vehicle of oppression. Some are used as pedestals, others are directly driven into the ground and immobile. These columns are the objects to which three women are tied and bound. Only the face of one woman is visible, the other two are downcast, their thick, black hair shading their faces from view. A fourth woman, naked from the waist up, wearing only a traditionally long, red skirt, is prostrate on the ground, pleading in front of an empty column. The lines of the earth, done in horizontal and jagged strokes, seem to be rising up to meet and support the women, just as much as the columns seem to be holding them captive. The moon, a lunar witness, holds an expression of distress at their
torment. These women are exposed, as they are always out in the open in society, but never quite seen. It seems that the women are not so much submissive as they are bound and controlled by forces that – since their captors are never visible or present in the images – refuse to acknowledge their participatory role or relationship to women’s subjugation.


*Dreams and Premonitions* is one of Izquierdo’s most famous, most discussed works. It encompasses her rendition of Surrealism as well as embraces her feminist aesthetic. The Catholic iconography of the crosses and the sense of, or refusal of, martyrdom is apparent. As well, the barren trees, the stark walkways, the dark and foreboding skyline, and bare white house walls are common themes in Izquierdo’s work.
Most unusual though is the fact that the accompanying bodies in the frame become progressively amputated, and most striking, of course, is that Izquierdo holds her own disembodied head out a window.

Instead of an open and empty window this time, we have Izquierdo herself in the window; a Maria that is dressed and adorned in the traditional Mexican way. It is the Izquierdo of her Autorretratos, her self-portraits, it is the Maria she liked to be and imagine and perform. She is holding the head of her unadorned, non-performative, weeping self. This self, whose hair is undone, the long tresses of which connect on multiple levels to multiple objects. In one direction her undone hair begins to weep and transform into leaves and then into tears over a cross, and on the other end entwine with tree branches and roots that are flying through another open window. The symbolism is both heavy-handed and mysterious.

Elizabeth Ferrer reads this painting as foreshadowing Izquierdo’s future life; her multiple paralyzing strokes, a failing marriage to Raul Uribe, financial difficulties, and her public disagreements with Rivera and the other muralists (Ferrer 27-8). Izquierdo became an outcast to the Mexican society that had a decade earlier idealized her, and the fame that had swept her around the globe with trumpets blaring, now left her impoverished and surrounded by a deafening silence. Ferrer believes that “This composition suggests that the body is the receptacle for pain, and that it must be sacrificed in the quest for ultimate redemption” (27). This is certainly in line with her strict Catholic upbringing and further evidenced by the iconography of the crosses throughout the image. Parallel to this, Dawn Ades argues that this painting “suggests that this bleak scene with doubled self-portrait concerns Izquierdo’s sense of struggle for an
identity within the specific and problematic situation in Mexico.” Particularly concerning, Ades writes, women’s position in post-Revolution Mexican society (122; 124).

While both of those readings are assuredly true, I believe it is also Izquierdo’s feminist aesthetic that takes the forefront, especially as it coincides with her realization of Mexicanidad. In this image we see not only a traditionally clothed Maria, depicting the body as she would represent herself, but we also see the naked and headless bodies of what we can presume are further self-representations. These bodies, along with the nude female bodies in Consolation in particular, are decolonizing the romanticized female nudes depicted elsewhere in the era. This is also very similar to Tina Modotti’s use of the female subject that, in stark contrast to Pictorialism, is represented as a working body, a resistant body, and also one of great and real beauty. As Adriana Zavala notes, “Izquierdo’s interpretation of the female body within a culturally unspecified yet primordial world suggests she was acutely aware of, and in disagreement with, the image of woman advanced elsewhere. The numerous references in her work to female sexual agency function as a form of pictorial resistance to the normalized system of exchange that typically surround the female nude” (77). The multiple depictions of Self in Dreams are Izquierdo’s way of dialoging with her multiple senses of Self as they both feel to her and as they are read and responded to by society.

The head that Izquierdo holds loses her body down a walled garden path in various stages. The first body is bright, almost neon red, and is headless, losing her mind and face and therefore most obvious identity. The next body has lost her torso, and her most overt display of womanhood, her breasts. Next, there are just legs running wildly and purposelessly. The bodies then cease to be bodies at all as they become only ankles,
then only feet, then only footprints in the ochre earth. This dissection is mirrored by the severed trees that have been amputated down to stumps. Yet full trees do exist – just not in reality. These trees are entwined with the long black hair from the disembodied head of Izquierdo, and they are floating fully limbed and alive poetically through a second window. There are also severed heads in this tree, hanging like Christmas ornaments, from the chestnut brown branches.

The heads that are missing from the *Dreams and Premonitions* torsos, and maybe even the heads hanging in the floating trees, may be found in *Allegory of Liberty*.


Here we see a winged female angel fly through a sky of lightening and a waning moon, carrying the severed heads of multiple women. The angel-woman flies past a smokestack, as pluming black smoke tries to cover the frame but cannot. The angel-woman holds up a torch of light, lifting her up to the heavens and guiding her way upwards. Izquierdo is communicating about how, similar to *la Consolacion*, women uphold each other, are saviors to each other, and can be free – if only in death and dismemberment from their raced, classed, and gendered bodies.
As well, Izquierdo depicts multi-ethnic women, each severed head is a different skin color; they are not the essentialized brown body, but a multitude of indigenous women, each still with her own narrative, her own color. Adrianna Zavala writes that “by differentiating the skin tones of women in many of her watercolors, she seems to subvert the effort to collapse Mexico’s racial diversity behind either mestizaje, the notion of racial fusion, or the concept of indigenismo” (76).

Juxtaposed with Allegory of Work, we can see in Allegory of Liberty that the one woman in her oppression, a naked body towered over by phallic columns, becomes many women free from their earthly domain and earthy bodies. Without the earth, without their bodies, they are also free from oppression and the patriarchal systems that claim most of them in Izquierdo’s other images.

The bodiless heads and the headless bodies, the multi-hued brown skins and raw-expressioned female faces, all lend themselves to a revolutionary departure from the official images of the Mexican national identity. Dawn Ades writes that Maria Izquierdo (and others, namely Frida Kahlo) had to fight for the “privilege” of using the Mexican ideology of Mexicanidad and even to fight for control over the depiction of the Mexican female body. She writes,

*Mexicanidad* provided the frame for an examination of gender, of status, and of aesthetic responsibility which then prompted forms of resistance and opposition; a new female subject began to emerge from within Surrealism, but this time from a challenge to a Surrealist ideology in which the female insofar as she was not the token of male identity partook in her dissolution” (125).

The “dissolution” that Izquierdo contributed to allowed her to embrace a *Mexicanidad* without being overtaken by politics. It further allowed her to confront the predicament of women in a patriarchal society without determining her sense of femininity as men would prescribe it. This
revolutionary stance created a unique feminist aesthetic based solely on the individual poetics that Izquierdo so strongly believed in, and that pushed realism to the breaking point of imagination.
CHAPTER IV
‘THE WHITE WITCH: JUANITA GUCCIONES TRANSCULTURAL AESTHETIC OF ALGERIA AND FEMINIST AESTHETIC OF A TRANSFORMATIVE SELF’.

“The Memory of Sand”

She crosses minds and rent lockers
but never properly lives anywhere
because her nature is to be Arabia
and certain configurations subject
to wind, inherit lawlessness
and the seductions of the djinn.

And if her crossings are trackless
they do leave swamp gas in blasted eyes
and the fragrance of recent encampments
in a desert always threatening
the wells of verdant enterprise.
She is the memory of sand.

- Djelloul Marbrook *Far From Algiers (2008)*.

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My relationship to Guccione feels personal, though I think that if I had ever met her in real life, I would have been a bit intimidated by her. Instead, I know her through her work, and only more intimately through my conversations and correspondences with her son, Djelloul Marbrook, and his wife Marilyn Marbrook. Del and Marilyn invited me (and my dog) into their lives, into their home, and into their archives. They are two of the warmest intellectuals and unreservedly generous people I have ever had the pleasure of working time with. They have given me so much of their time and consideration, and in return, I can only offer them these words. In gratitude of their graciousness, I dedicate this article to Djelloul and Marilyn Marbrook.
It is difficult to know where exactly to begin a conversation about Juanita Guccione. Her self, her art, and her life are mercurial, intricate, shadowed in their propensity for sudden change and kaleidoscopic shifts in perspective. To carefully outline and carve up her life stages would do her a disservice; she seemed to live from the inside out, using times and places as catapults, not benchmarks. Yet there is a jigsaw puzzle progression we can feel out as we see how being a fashion pirate led her to Europe, which in turn led her to Bou Saada, Algeria. In a 1934 *New York Times* article it was announced that “Nita Rice, who married an Arab recently…has on show eleven oils of Algeria” at the Brooklyn Museum (*New York Times* 6B). This simple sentence only begins to ravel the complexity of presenting Juanita Guccione. Her travels to Algeria are sensational, her portraits of the expedition sensitive and thoughtful, yet it is this extravagant and unusual life that has the possibility of overwhelming her art. It is easy to distort her work, easier still to exaggerate her life – she never did “marry an Arab” – so that the entanglements of her personalities, genres, and experiences become lost to narrative embellishment. To situate Juanita among her modernist contemporaries is to acknowledge her era, her context; yet, it is difficult to determine specific influences on successive phases of her work. It is true that Guccione almost completely shifted her generic preference every decade, but such drastic shifts in perspectives often had more to do with her inner landscape than her outer reality. It’s as if she was searching for a new place, new people, a new language and backdrop that would fit what she was feeling on any given day. It was precisely this kind of sojourning, of both territories and self, that led Juanita Rice to cross the Sahara with the Ouled Nail tribe of Bedouins – twice.
Anais Nin once said of Guccione: “Our dreams are often diffuse and fragmented. Juanita makes them cohesive and clear, as clear as the daily world. Few people can paint the world of our dreams with as much magic, precision, and clarity. It makes the myths by which we live as vivid and dramatic as our diurnal life” (qtd. in Carver). Echoing this sentiment, Guccione’s son, Djelloul Marbrook, has similarly stated that Guccione “explored the nature of women in mythic terms” (“Unrequited Comprehension”). In line with this view, I hope to explore what it means for the myth and magic of Guccione to move from a vibrant realism of transnational scope to an imaginary world of feminist power and intrigue, yet with no political intentions and rarely receiving any acknowledgment from the market-driven art world.

Guccione ardently disavowed allegiance to nation or feminism, yet her work speaks to both loudly and clearly, which she accomplishes in large part because of transculturalism. Mikhail Epstein, a Russian cultural critic, writes that “a ‘transculturalist’ tries to restore the mysterious script of the simultaneously present and absent transcultural condition. In essence, s/he both discovers and creates this realm” (299). This is precisely what Guccione’s sojourn in Algeria did for her, and Algeria; she created her own perspective of the nation that surpasses her Western view and Algeria’s Eastern one in order to create a wholly new language by which to express her unprecedented perspective. This transculturalism also leads her to create a feminist aesthetic in the sense that both require a transcendence of boundaries in order to realize a self-created world. To this end, I will explore how Juanita Guccione’s work moves fluidly from a vibrant transcultural perspective to a mythic, feminist aesthetic-infused world dominated by women. Inside this trajectory I will expand on how both her
transcultural perspective and her feminist world create a new language, a communication that transcends her eras and their societal limitations, as well her own shifting senses of self.

To begin at the very beginning, Anita Rice was born at midnight on June 20, 1904 in Chelsea, just outside of Boston. Her father, called either Emanuel or Emery, was a baker and worked for a time at Pillsbury. When the children were young, the family moved to Pittsfield and then to Great Barrington and opened an inn of their own. It must have been a postcard vision of the American dream for the mother, Hilda Vanderbilt Rice, who traveled from Prussia to owning an estate in the foothills of the Berkshires where her husband raised trotters in his spare time. Reality intercedes, though, when the

family business collapses, and, after a short time back in Boston the family relocates to Brooklyn, New York. This is in large part apparently due to Emanuel losing his business, as the owner of the Great Barrington Inn, in a card game (Marbrook 8.5.2009).


When Emanuel Rice died in 1918, it left his family in a severe financial crisis. Irene Pereira\(^{ii}\), the eldest child, changed her academic schooling to a vocational track and later attended stenography courses in order to help support the family. The youngest of the daughters, Dorothy, began her studies in art, and eventually all three daughters would train in various arts courses, most notably at the Art Students League. Guccione was considered the family beauty, but it was her talents that allowed her to become a fashion pirate and gain access to fashion’s most extravagant design firms (Marbrook 08.05.2009). Using her skills, Guccione’s fashion piracy involved being hired as a model and copying
the designs of competing houses. The assumption that the pretty faces of the models and sketch-girls could not be so talented, or so devious, worked well for Guccione’s duplicity.

In 1930-31, Guccione began her sojourn, taking tramp steamers around the Mediterranean. Starting in France and making her way to Italy, Greece and then Egypt, she supplemented her income along the way by taking on commissions, portraits, and sketching out café scenes (JG.com). In lieu of any record of her European period that included portraiture, we have two portraits that showcase her technical abilities.

![Image 32: Anais Nin. 1956. (No.609)](image1.png) ![Image 33: The Velvet Collar. 1936. (No.611)](image2.png)

*The Velvet Collar* (1936) is an example of her painstakingly detailed and perfectly issued studio portraiture. This is only one of a half dozen portraits in her portfolio; as if they were executed just to prove she could do them, but as they are the least represented genre in her oeuvre, and because her primary work is so starkly different in nature and meaning, clearly she chooses not to be a portraitist.
Another example, but one much more familiar to Guccione’s subtleties, is her portrait of Anais Nin. This 1956 sketch has all the emotional detail and depth that *The Velvet Collar* sacrifices for studio perfection. When Anais Nin said that Guccione painted our dreams with “magic, precision, and clarity” she returned the favor of perfectly capturing the intrigue and melancholy of Anais Nin. It is what makes Guccione’s work so rare and engaging: a mythic interpretation of a self’s inner landscape. When Anais Nin further explained that Guccione’s paintings make “the myths by which we live as vivid and dramatic as our diurnal life” she gave an internal reading of Juanita’s work that mirrors our external lives (qtd. in Carver). As Anais Nin witnessed, Guccione clearly craved the mystical and profound, and this is what must have compelled her to Algeria.

It is in late 1931 that Guccione first learned about the artists’ colony in Bou Saada where artists could live cheaply and beatifically. During this time Algeria was under French occupation, but had been contesting its colonization by multiple nations since their domination under the Ottoman Empire in the early 1500s. It is an almost lifelong struggle against hierarchical domination and militarization and a quest for independence and peace that had come to characterize Algerian culture when Guccione arrived.
Guccione lived in the East Algerian artists’ colony Bou Saada, the City of Happiness, for almost five years (1931-1934). Her son, Djelloul Marbrook, recounts one of Guccione’s typical misadventures when she was stopped by French police:

When French officials warned the young German-speaking American of the dangers of traveling with the Bedouins, she said, I feel safer with them than with you. The less-than-enchanted French twice arrested her under suspicion of spying for Germany.

Another story, perhaps true, perhaps embellished, is one recounted by Amanda Carver in “Explore the Work of Juanita Guccione.”

On one dark night Bedouins attacked a group of Foreign Legionaries over a dispute regarding dancing girls. Amidst the gunfire, Guccione, who was then known as Juanita Rice, climbed high on a rooftop to sketch the scene, impervious to the danger around her.
It was certainly unusual for an American woman to be traveling alone in 1931, let alone traveling with Bedouins across the Sahara, but Guccione was compelled and let nothing, not even the French police and the threat of their jails, keep her from capturing the country she loved in watercolors and oils. In fact, after such narratives, it becomes relatively easy to picture what some very old women recalled to Djelloul: Guccione riding a horse through the villages in black boots, jodhpurs, and a billowy white blouse: the white witch, as they called her, mesmerizing her audience as much as she then captivated them on canvas (DM 1.14.2012).

Guccione came to live with the Ouled Nail tribe, who stand in stark contrast to the social structure and constriction of occupied Algeria, as they are known for their dancing and for being a matriarchal culture. These latter two elements combine in great force when we see how dancing can be a particularly feminist expression of aesthetics. For example, Renee Lorraine argues that “matriarchal art transcends the traditional artistic mode of communication which consists of maker/product/receiver. It is a process in which virtually everyone in a society participates collectively to give the matriarchal structure external expression through the ritual of dance” (37). The matriarchal structure of the Ouled Nail tribe, therefore, is concretized through the collective and participatory act of art that is created and performed through female agency, and witnessed and colluded by the men of the tribe. This collective and refreshingly restorative process and art must have been greatly appreciated and internalized by Guccione.
The watercolors that Guccione completed in the early ‘30s are almost transcendental. They are vivid and picturesque, but without reductive overtones. There is always a singular perspective from which she paints, a certain angle, perhaps to catch a certain slant of light, that repeatedly identifies the work as hers. The color-scheme also becomes a trademark for Guccione; at this angle, the tans and golds of the hills reverberate off the plums and blues of the valleys in a uniquely purposeful way. It is a kind of non-romanticized but magical realism. The tone and depth of Guccione’s work clearly witnesses to her love affair with Algeria.

Guccione’s work is vibrant and engaging, but more than that it is the ideologies that the work speaks to, the emotions hidden beneath the context, the history and the era, that make her work profound. To witness this, we can read the work of earlier Westerners
who could not or would not embrace Algeria as it is, and who therefore stand in stark contrast to Guccione’s sense of belonging and the feelings of reckless national allegiance that her Algerian art exhibited. In John Foster Fraser’s 1913 treatise on the Far East, *The Land of Veiled Women: Some Wanderings in Algeria, Tunisia & Morocco*, the landscape is described as both primitive and uncapturable. He writes in particular of Bou-Saada,

> It is a mother-earth town of the drab tint of sun-baked bricks, the houses square-faced but bulging, and scarcely a window in the place. The thin, shadow-soaked streets are drunken. A bit of the town the French officials and traders have taken to themselves and made livable. The native town is, in design and appearance, much what a child of four would make if given a barrow-load of mud! (Fraser 1).

Most immediately striking is Fraser’s direct correlation with Bou Saada’s livability and the fact that this was solely accomplished by the colonization efforts of the invading French. His shallow appreciation for the town ceases completely when he compares the native design and aesthetics to a child’s trifling play of mud.

> Conversely, in the following paragraph, Fraser goes on to admit, however, that none of the adult and highly trained artists in Bou Saada can indeed capture what “mother-earth” has created. He continues,

> But the light – the light – the beautiful light! The blue Italian sky is leaden to this sky. A few artists know of Bou-Saada, and come for the light. I have seen a painter struggle for an hour to get a blue approaching the blue of the heaven hereabouts. He failed. I have seen a man trying to get the shimmer of the sands, and, good artist though he be, the picture was a daub when the real thing lay before one. It is a light that burns out all detail in a landscape. It produces grand splashes of colour. It makes a mud-wall picturesque. (Fraser 1-2).
In light of Fraser’s elevation of the landscape, and his reduction of how the natives lived and built upon it, we can then see how the Algerians so easily embraced and commended Guccione’s depiction and understanding of the true and indescribable Bou Saada.

Image 36: *Algerian Village*. Oil on Board. 1932. (no. 153)

Guccione’s depictions of Algeria and its peoples are vibrant, lush, and colorful. Her landscapes go beyond the more emotionless, deterministic social realism of the day to incorporate the angles of sharp and exact pinks and yellows of a multidimensional terrain. Her nationalism is one of emotion. In *Algerian Village* (1932) we see a sunset-light, a deep and abiding light. The sky and mountains tower over an embraced village;
the sharp yet curved perspective and softened angles beg us to walk the street. This “mother-earth” is not of Fraser’s ethnocentric view, it is of Guccione’s encompassing perspective. As witness to the profoundly progressive and humanist perspective that Guccione brings to Algeria, in 2004 the Algerian national energy company, Sonatrach, bought 174 paintings, watercolors, and sketches completed during Guccione’s time in Algeria, with the intention keeping them on permanent exhibit at their Algerian headquarters (DM.com) iii.


At an exhibit of Guccione’s work at The Arts Club of Washington, Algerian Ambassador Idriss Jazairy commented that too often Westerners have appropriated Algeria and created their own Westernized versions of the Orient in a display of cultural imperialism. After 132 years of colonial occupation which was pictorially represented by Orientalist paintings of Algerian subjugation and humiliation, there is today what Jazairy
calls a “Neo-Orientalism” which re-paints history from an Algerian perspective, full of pride and reclamation. In full opposition to Fraser’s cultural imperialism is Juanita’s sense of “Neo-Orientalism” and transculturalism.

Transculturalism is of primary importance to any discussion on Juanita Guccione’s importance in the artistic and modernist world. First, it supersedes what her art accomplishes transnationally because the impact has reverberating consequences rather than simply a border crossing function. Mikhail Epstein writes that transculturalism is not just a theory or epistemology, it is, rather, “a mode of being at the crossroads of cultures. A transcultural personality naturally seeks to free his or her native culture…from self-deification and fetishism” (Epstein 296). This is done in part not through abdication of one’s own culture or another’s, but through an inclusion that transcends imperialism’s assertion of dominance or through multiculturalism’s passive acceptance and tolerance of the Other.
Guccione, Jazairy states, existed historically between the two periods of cultural imperialism and Neo-Orientalism. She eschewed Western fantasies and stereotypes and instead developed a hybrid art form through the interaction of European techniques and the multifaceted Islamic culture. This hybrid and conscious art form, called “a genuine Orientalism” by Jazairy, is said to be a kind of “Sufism-on-canvas” (Jazairy). Rather than simply take on an Impressionistic use of Realism these images reach, as Jazairy has noted when he calls them “Sufism on canvas,” a spiritual realm surpassing both the subject/artist dynamic and their historicized context.

Ambassador Jazairy, positioning her perspective and work both politically and socially, goes on to state that “Juanita’s work is particularly meaningful to us as she impersonated this symbiosis between Western sensitivities and Algerian-ness. She is the symbol of true art which spans across cultures to become an international language” (Jazairy). This “international language” is a transcultural communication that interweaves private moments and deep personal connections to the land and culture, in turn, transcending Guccione’s own gaze as Artist to communicate what every viewer can hear and see. As we become voyeurs and companions through intimacy, not force, we become transculturalists.

In Guccione’s Algerian portraits, in particular, we can see a visual representation of her emotional experience. There is a great sense of calm that permeates the canvas, one that balances and holds a third space (to use Gutierrez loosely) of equally distributed beliefs in geography, national identity, ethnicity, and gender. Epstein, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, writes that
Though transculture depends on the efforts of separate individuals to overcome their identification with separate cultures, on another level, it is a process of interaction between cultures themselves in which more and more individuals have found themselves “outside” of any particular culture, “outside” of its national, racist, sexist, age, political, and other limitations…[It is] finding one’s place on the border of existing cultures. This realm beyond all cultures is located inside of transculture and belongs to this state of not-belonging. (Epstein 298).

Rather than grasping for belonging from the Other through negation of one’s own nation or identity, a wholly new space is created that surpasses both. Guccione’s Algerian pictures resonate so deeply with both East and West precisely for this reason: they are in a state of “not-belonging” to either, and therefore speak to us in a language that occupies all spaces. This is accomplished not just through Guccione’s choice of subject or landscape, but through particular aesthetics.

In these portraits we see an homage to the beauty, culture, and spirit of the Algerians without the ethnic or national over-generalizing of making a moment insist on capturing a lifetime. There are no portraits of the French, no landscapes of the occupation and barracks. There are no scenes of battle, vengeance, or cruelty.
What we do see, as in *Blind Man Praying*, is a man rising out of the earth, the same terra cotta color-scenes in both bodies, his hands in prayer and also forcing the upward movement that seems to recall his journey up from the *terra firma*. They are both sacred and bountiful: the embodiment of “Algerian-ness” that is a private moment meant to capture and hold only just that moment and not speak for an entire country or population. Guccione does not attempt another colonization of stereotype and gaze of an Other. She does, however, capture the essential feeling and mood through the taste of the desert and the feel of the sun reflecting off clay. In soft angles and direct eye-contact – even with a blind man – Guccione allows her position as author to be equal to her subjects, and allows her subjects to have an agency in their dialogue with viewers.
In opposition to *Blind Man Praying*, we have *Five Men in Red Hats (From Above)*; here the viewers become interlopers in an ordinary moment among a group of men. Rather than feel like voyeurs, however, Guccione’s softened glance, pastel colors, shy and almost reserved angle, makes the viewers and the subjects feel complicit and comfortable. She is highlighting a conventional moment that in her many years living in Algeria must have been rather common and therefore almost intimate rather than a touristic stolen glance into private lives.

Image 40: *Five Men in Red Hats (from above)*. Watercolor 1933. (No. 563)
In 1934 Guccione bore a son, Djelloul Marbrook, to Chehaba Ben Aissa Ben Mabrouk of the Ouled Nail tribe. As recorded by Djelloul, when his parents’ relationship ended, Guccione took him to England and then to New York on a tourist visa. His grandmother, Hilda, and aunt, Dorothy, begin a long and tedious battle with the Immigration Service and French government to keep him in the United States (JG.com).

Once settled back in New York, Juanita begins to show her work, signing paintings both “Nita Rice” (her childhood nickname and family surname) and “Juanita Marbrook” (an anglicized version of the surname of Chehaba Mabrouk that Juanita claimed for her own for a short time). Djelloul Marbrook writes that “Later in her life she returns to these Algerian works, and to others, and changes their signatures to ‘Juanita Guccione,’ causing archival problems that impede her quest for recognition” (JG.com). Her continual name changes did indeed cause problems for any consistent recognition; however, they also signified a shifting selfhood and a powerful re-naming and reclamation of each of her incarnations.

From the mid to late 1930s, Guccione was immersed in quintessentially American culture, working for the WPA. A single mother with an infant son, just returning from five years in the Sahara, Guccione must have felt displaced and overwhelmed at times. This perhaps led her to the community of the WPA more than any affiliation with national movements or social realist intentions. Her most prized work during this time is a mural for the 23rd Street Post Office in Manhattan. This mural was done in collaboration with David Alfaro Siqueiros, and reflects the beginning of her realist and Cubist period.
Image 41: *Sketch from 23rd Street Post Office Mural*. Pencil on Paper. 1937. (No. 002)

It was during this time that Guccione was her most politically active. She was a member of the Artists Equity, and continued to be progressive in her perspective despite marrying conservative Republicans. While her sister Irene Pereira was an avid Communist until the Hitler-Stalin Pact, Guccione continuously stayed on the sidelines of political movements and debates. While she befriended exiled French Surrealists such as Andre Breton during the war, and even made drawings for their newspaper, *Pour La Victoire*, Guccione eschewed faux pundits and windbags. She once said that “while Breton made her laugh, she was less than impressed with his ideas and his art.” This falls in line with Juanita’s beliefs about art theory and her reticence in general. Djelloul writes, “She didn’t like art-historical criticism, largely because she felt it was a platform for smart alecks” (“Unrequited Comprehension”).

Guccione would rather align herself ideologically with the Mexicans, especially Rivera and Orozco⁴, and of course her muralist co-worker, Siqueiros, than the French
Surrealists, whom she considered overly literary, overly theoretical. She, like the Mexican Muralists, painted from a visceral level, not a scholastic one (Marbrook 08.05.2009). It was also probably around this time that Guccione taught at Coopers Union and the Art Students League. Though I can find no record of her there, under any of her names, Djelloul remembers going with his mother to her classes and where, in her reticence to lecture, she taught her students through demonstrating technique (Marbrook 08.05.2009).

Image 42: *Spirit of Manhattan*. Oil on Board. 1936. (No. 154)  

Before Guccione fully succumbed to the fantastical feminist landscape she felt compelled to communicate, she delved into Cubism. This period is important for multiple reasons. First, it allows us to contextualize Guccione into the larger artistic marketplace and art-historical period in which she lived. And second, it allows us to see the ways she begins to disassemble the faces, spaces, and bodies of the portraiture realm in order to later create a wholly displaced and ethereal community. Of course there is never such a
clean trajectory for any artist, but we could argue that her work at this time positions her
to use Cubism’s insistent questioning of line, texture, and shape. The corset becomes the
cube, the crowns and crinoline become the shadow and the formlessness of space.
Picasso’s Woman Playing the Mandolin (1909) and the muted, color-blocked palette of
Juan Gris combine to revel in creating objects and bodies that are so abstractly depicted
that we are forced to question how we name and define such objects and bodies in the
first place.

In Guccione’s Reflections (1937), a wallpaper design, and The Faces We Wore
(1935), a large oil, we can see the influence of both Art Deco and Dadaism. Indicative of
modernist Cubism, we see the elements of shadowed geometry giving the illusion of
spatial fulfillment. Yet, while Picasso insisted he was depicting nature in its more real
form, Guccione seems to use Cubism to break apart the human figure from its framed
boundaries to create a new and still natural and real form.
This genre allows Guccione, and all modernists, to remove the ego of self-reflection in order to explore a deeper reality beneath the mirrored body, and further, to question the female form as it is most often represented by patriarchal structures and societal mores.

The interaction between the bodies becomes one of overlap, a condensing of bodies. There is a multidimensional negotiation of each individual and their interplay rather than focusing on the female figure, the curves of the nude, or any other sexualized resonance of the female body. Here, the women are negotiating space, form, expression. It is a landscape sorrowfully filled with the women’s sense of lack and longing.

It is not a political or natural reality she is attempting to communicate, but an emotional, multidimensional one. In Reflections we have a society depicted in its modernity, replete with depressive colorscape, earthy and moribund, and the expressionless grasping of unrequited and yet apocalyptic post-World War I malaise and fear. Further, in the 1938 The Faces We Wore, we see a multidimensional study of the nuclear family – a smaller unit plucked right out of the heart of the Reflections society. This family is given color, depth, and flow. The burgundy and blue-hued bodies meld seamlessly with the black and white masks/faces. The shadowed figure and the stark and lonely tree in the background become less looming and more integrated than they first imply.

From 1937 to 1944 Guccione studied in Provincetown, Massachusetts and Manhattan under the guidance of Hans Hofmann. She worked in her own studios throughout this time, and even had a studio space next to Arshile Gorky’s on Union Square (DM 08.05.09). It is during this time that Guccione begins to integrate not only the influences around her in a very profound way, but she also finds her own voice and
freedom on the canvas. It is also in 1943 that Juanita married Dominick John Guccione, a Manhattan taxidermist and real estate entrepreneur. When, a few years later, the couple bought a cottage in Woodstock, New York, a new chapter opened to some extent, as Dominick is a positive influence on her art and she uses the exotic animals from his taxidermy studio as subjects for her work. Dominick considered artists and musicians vastly more important than doctors and lawyers, whom he called mere “mechanics” (DM 08.05.09). This must have provided some validation to Juanita’s artistic sensibilities and given support to her life-calling as a painter. It is in the 1940s and 50s that Juanita takes “a room of one’s own,” her training with Hofmann, and the support of Dominick Guccione, and propelled herself into styles not seen before in her work. This is in large part also facilitated by the Surrealist movement. Surrealism allowed artists like Guccione to convey without judgment an unboundaried world where imagination took priority over pragmatism. So Guccione, though far from prominent in the movement, fits into its jigsaw puzzle neatly – for a time. Guccione’s use of alternate languages and realities, along with the breaking down of boundaries which hold our identities into neat and square boxes, encapsulates the philosophy of Surrealism.

Penelope Rosemont in *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* succinctly describes the underlying tenets of the movement: “In a nutshell, the surrealist argument goes like this: If civilization persists on its disastrous path – denying dreams, degrading language, shackling love, destroying nature, perpetuating racism, glorifying authoritarian institutions (family, church, state, patriarchy, military, the so-called free market), and reducing all that exists to the status of disposable commodities – then surely devastation is in store not only for us but for all life on this planet” (xxxiv). For Juanita this genre not
only allowed her to openly question normative family structures, but also to delve more deeply into an individual’s definitions of womanhood and the possibilities of the imagination outside societal dictates.

In the first *Surrealist Manifesto* (1924), Andre Breton argues for adopting the dream-world state as one’s dominant perspective in life. Further, he embraces the Freudian idea of dreams as almost divine messages, and proof of the wisdom and transcendence beyond the rational and logical banalities of everyday life, language, and boundaries. This exploration or investigation of the human mind is just the beginning of the magical and preposterous mysteries of the unconscious. Art is the proof, he suggests, that the mystical mind is attempting an escape from the dominant reality.

Andre Breton defines Surrealism as “pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought” (qtd. Waldberg 72). In its noun tense, this thought is “outside all aesthetic or moral obligations.” In its philosophical form, this thought becomes the core belief that “Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of the dream, and in the disinterested play of thought. It leads to the permanent destruction of all other psychic mechanisms and to its substitution for them in the solution of the principal problems of life” (qtd. in Waldberg 72). Hence, the object-less world of Gorky and the object-laden world of Dali are both validating of the wordless poetry and chaos-covered love that will revolutionize and be the salvation of our oppressive and inegalitarian world.
Ill Wind represents the chaos of the modernist era; our political mind is following on the heels of the Great Depression, the stage is being set for World War II, and everyone is struggling with the all-consuming practices of industrialism and the advent of globalization. Here the cello or bass and the anchor become the debris of culture and work that are scattered and tossed aside just as the flag of an unknown country becomes planted to claim some far-off territory in the World War era. The arched doorways, a suspended metaphor for Juanita and reminiscent of De Chirico’s arches, are fenced this time and could be a castle or a prison, and maybe those are synonymous in this castaway land of white ghost inhabitants and shipwrecked boats. There are three primary figures: a cubist geometric figure in the mid-ground, a small, brown totemic and smiling figure, and a compressed ghoul barely existing and seeping up from the bottom of the frame. Each figure could represent an issue or idea that Juanita is struggling with. The first signals her connection to Cubism and Dadaism, the second an almost inner-child-like character, a
Buddha totem, that seems to be a superstitious good-luck charm for her journey into the unknown. And finally the white ghoul whose shape implies s/he is coming out of the birth canal to be born into this moment. Over all of these very distinct and disconnected figures shines a full moon, not an eclipsed one, whose rays of light are dark and foreboding.

This chaos is an anomaly for Juanita; even at her most abstract she is usually more literal, more tangible. Yet, most interestingly, it is at this juncture that Guccione takes the least traveled of the forked paths. As pictures of clay streets and communal society, along group portraits of Algerian men, turn more into individual scenes, without context and without direction, so too does Guccione move from Cubism to an Abstract Surrealism all of her own design and language. It seems as though her other subjects are lost and have succumbed to the inner darkness – there are barely any external objects or recognizable backdrops to give meaning to their exile, to anchor their destitution. The world is destroyed by war, by technology, by madness and despair – the only hope is in our turning inward and realizing that there is a world that can save us – our own internal landscape made manifest. Take for instance *The Way the Wind Blows* (1938).
This 1938 painting is the tipping point of what Djelloul calls Guccione “breakthrough year” (“Unrequited Comprehension”). The bodies’ position and structure recall Picasso, the colors Ernst. The white emblem-like patch on the figures’ “uniform” of red, teal, and blue allows them to become a part of a tribe, part of a larger body of work or workers despite their relaxed repose and lute playing. The two women seem to be on the other side of the arched doorways from Ill Wind From Europe – yet these arches are far off on the right and almost irrelevant to the narrative of what these women have found for themselves on this side of the world. The Jungian water of the subconscious begins to build itself into the forefront of Guccione world where, as Djelloul has noted, women not only inhabit but rule (Marbrook). These women, as
opposed to the women on the World War side of the arched doorways, are not at the whim of the international warmongers and despots of Europe and the States. These women are controlled only by the luck and the fate of the roulette wheel; the laws of their world are still unwritten, still becoming, just as their faces of subtle abstraction fade into becoming.

Image 48: V-Mail. Oil on canvas. 1943. (No. 104)

Guccione’s oils in the late 30s and 1940s vacillate between the societal devastation depicted in Ill Wind From Europe to the individual negotiation of personal grief in V-Mail. This World War II oil shows the multiple faces a woman might wear when negotiating V-mail: in the upper left, a downcast, vacant, a lone mask balancing independently on a pedestal, the face one might wear when negotiating the societal expectations of a widow. The foregrounded mask is wide-eyed, staring up to the heavens, and expectantly awaiting good news. The last mask, on the bottom right, is the one just
pulled off after reading the V-mail, the one that is falling, the one that is the silent victim of war, the “unfortunate” as Kaethe Kollwitz might call her, and is moribund, as are her circumstances. The bifurcation of this painting shows the two worlds explicitly: on the left there are birds in flight, implying freedom, movement, and the agency of a casually leaning arm and eyes that still see even when disembodied. While on the right there is a fully eclipsed moon, a downtrodden expression and the faceless body. V-Mail is an expression of Guccione’s ethereal, feminist characters negotiating the old world; it is a liminal portrait, connecting us to both realities and giving us a path to traverse and follow from our world to hers.

Image 49: Where is My Face? Oil on canvas. 1936. (No. 444)
Where is My Face? is past the woman in V-Mail and shares many of the same qualities of The Way the Wind Blows. It embodies the characteristics of Juanita’s signature feminist world: the eclipsed moon hanging thickly in the sky, the enlarged thighs and elongated arms, the disproportionate hands and feet, the swollen bellies emphasized by almost tribal markings, the faceless and voiceless women who communicate completely through their bodies, their actions, their bodily positions, and the often exclusively utilitarian objects that they carry. These women are not fully fleshed, they are dark and shadowed and not yet fully formed or birthed. They, too, are still negotiating the old world of needing a face or mask, in this case a solid black shadow. Yet, they are also holding the net of the future, ready to cast out for color, landscape, and a world where they do not need a persona, they just need to be their true selves.

It is at this juncture that Guccione swan-dived off the cliffs of Realist murals, European Cubism, and Abstract Surrealism to enter the realm of mythic entanglements. From Algerian skies and colors that stick on your palette like lemon rinds or peppermints, and through the American art scene and its European influences, Guccione’s world of imagination and femininity is a startling transition at its most subtle. But it is at this moment that she springboarded herself into a feminist realm that completed and ultimately finished her.
Guccione’s work in the 1950s and 1960s is where she begins to leave the real world as much as the world leaves her. Her work becomes so fantastical and feminist that critics are befuddled in their attempt to label it. While its “astral elements elude the Surrealist canon” no one can think of a more apt artistic label to rationalize its message (JG.com). Yet one of the primary ways that Guccione surpasses the Surrealists’ political ideologies is through her gender aesthetic, and its explicit challenge of gender norms that were often overlooked by the Surrealists. Rosemont writes that “Surrealism inspired men and women to break the chains of traditional notions of gender – to question and supersede the claptrap of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity.’ Their aim, implicit in Breton’s
Second Manifesto (1929), was to determine that ‘point in the mind’ at which male and female, no less than ‘life and death, the real and the imaginary, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, cease to be perceived as contradictions’” (Rosemont xlviii). Guccione here succeeds in surpassing these binaries where other Surrealists expounded on them theoretically but often failed to realize them artistically. Guccione’s female-dominated world speaks to a woman’s inner landscape as much as her possible or imagined external one. Mythic in scope and intimate in nature, the alchemical and emotional paintings depict a fantastical world where female spirits roam freely and fully embodied, in tune with nature, and without external or oppressive chains to bind them in a world they define, create and name for themselves.

This re-negotiation and re-imagining of the feminine coincides with Juanita’s personal life. We can read Guccione’s own bifurcated and somewhat manic personality, even her possible mental illness, and her relationship to Self and womanhood through her paintings. For instance, Djelloul recalls his mother being bisexual, and, despite her multiple marriages to men, asserts that his mother preferred women.

She regarded men, for the most part, as jerks and often admonished me not to be a jerk, which she clearly thought I was. She was particularly contemptuous of the way men acted around beautiful women, stuttering, strutting, bullshitting, whatever. I remember walking on Union Square with her one summer evening. She was wearing a white skirt, white shoes, and a broad-brimmed straw hat. A rather handsome man approached and his jaw dropped as he looked at her. When he passed my mother grabbed me by the collar and said, men are such jerks, don’t be a jerk! I remember this incident because I have always admired the kind of woman who, like my aunt Irene, would have smiled or nodded graciously, but for my mother it was an occasion for contempt and anger. (DM 08.05.09).
As a poet, Djelloul has a way of capturing the realism and charm of such a moment with clarity and grace. And I think this kind of moment is telling of Guccione’s severity as well as her internal negotiations of the outer world that is clearly and starkly echoed in her work, as much as it portends her reclusiveness in later life.

Another telling element that informs her female-dominated world is her younger sister Dorothy’s death, due to breast cancer, at the young age of 41. The battle may have led, in part, to Guccione’s depiction of one-breasted Amazonian women. The combination of her bisexuality, or unrealized, unrequited lesbianism, her seeming distaste or distrust of men, and her sister’s battle with breast cancer, all intersect to realize and actuate a world of women that are empowered and independent in a way they never could be in reality; these women only have such remarkable agency in oils and on canvas. This context allows for and determines Guccione’s feminist aesthetic and its depiction of agency.

Acampora and Cotton in Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom explain the idea of a female “aesthetic agency” by writing that “the basic feature of aesthetic agency has immediate applications for the transfiguration of the body, its articulations in the productions of dominant and oppressive cultures, and resistive practices that form the basis for political action” (7). For these reasons, without overt political or feminist creeds or doctrines, Guccione’s creation of a female-dominated world (particularly within the era of surrealism) is a subversive act of gender aesthetics. What moves Guccione into a separate sphere of “aesthetic agency” is that her world is a particularly feminist construction of abstraction, with very real and tangible consequences for the viewers’ world. For these reasons it
could also be read as a metaphysical version of transculturalism. Acampora and Cotton go on to write that aesthetic agency is “a way of dwelling in a sense that permeates ordinary lived experience and conditions the extraordinary sense of connection to others” (7). This is precisely what transculturalism does as well – invades the lived experience of the artist with another lived experience in order to create a wholly new space of dwelling, and “not-belonging” to either binary, but to its own creation. This transculturalism defies gender, race, ethnic and national boundaries not by forsaking any of these but by “finding one’s place on the borders of existing cultures” (Epstein 298). In this case the “cultures” are the World War era history and psychology, the artistic genres around and including Surrealism, and the societally dictated ways of defining and performing womanhood. Guccione takes this transculturalism and its necessary redefinition of cultures and boundaries and creates her own feminist aesthetic.

Marilyn French in “Is There a Feminist Aesthetic?” states: “There are two fundamental, related principles that mark a work of art as feminist: first, it approaches reality from a feminist perspective; second, it endorses female experience” (69). The feminist perspective is presented through “the narrational point of view, the point of view lying behind the characters and events, [that] penetrates, demystifies, or challenges patriarchal ideologies,” while the female experience is conveyed through the dissemination of “a pluralistic reality made up of connection, flow, interrelation, and therefore equality” (69; 73). While French says that we “have not yet created a language to describe interconnection…[because] our language is based on fabricated dichotomies” (73). I believe that the feminist aesthetics of Juanita Guccione, as shown through her Surrealist work, does in fact create a language that embodies feminist artistic principles.
by both challenging and transcending the binaries of gender ideologies. Guccione’s female-dominated world not only asserts a multiperspectival interpretation of the female character, she surpasses expectations to re-imagine and wholly create anew a world that is self-determined and individually defined. There is a feminist aesthetic, and it is enveloped in Guccione’s artwork.

![Image 51: A Good Catch (3 Women, Fish, Nets). Oil on canvas. 1947. (No. 119)](image)

We see these luminous and complex women hesitantly begin to exist in *Where is My Face?* We then begin to glimpse their connectivity to each other and to the viewer in *The Way the Wind Blows*. In *A Good Catch* we can see the actualization of Guccione’s female-dominated world as it is becoming normalized. Here is a glimpse into the daily life of the women who, having given up their masks and personas, have now re-imagined
themselves and their own society. Guccione was fond of saying, “I’m not at all interested in what [feminists] say, only in what they do” (JG.com), and this is apparent in her work in that her female figures are almost always in movement. In this particular painting we see three women, all caught in a moment of fluidity and fully at ease in their bodies and lives. The figure on the left is in a stance of pride, dominance, and self-confidence. The figure on the right is leaning against a net overflowing with fish, only her left breast is pronounced, with an air of sensuality, even humor. The seated figure has a demeanor of vulnerability and warmth as she holds a caught fish in her left hand while her right hand extends slightly into the air, ready to catch another of the falling fish. These three women could be said to represent a triple-goddess aspect of maiden/mother/crone, embodying all women’s internal landscape of supplicating tenderness/active strength/calm empowerment. We see their tri-aspects combine to feed and nourish themselves and each other with their “good catch.” They are not pedestaled figurines awaiting viewers’ judgment or approval, they are captivating and dynamic figures working for themselves, working with each other, and merely glancing at the viewer, as if to ask, What are you doing?
In *Alarm* we see a snapshot of panic, the figure’s feet barely on the ground, signaling an instance where their world may be threatened. The primary woman runs blindly through the center of the canvas. She is flanked by two almost comical wide-eyed roosters, their legs splayed in a frantic run. A background figure to the right mimics the forefront figure’s outstretched arms and bent, running foreleg. Also in the background, to the left, a lone figure apparently hails the others, beckoning them to the curved archway of a blank building. There are multiple repeated motifs here as well; namely, the arched doorways always leading us someplace else, always providing an escape from – or a doorway to let us into – the primary image and moment, the checkered harlequin floor, the circus attire of the figures, the dark- or multi-colored- skinned and disproportionate bodies, and Juanita’s signature eclipsing moon hung in the duskling sky. The landscape of the background, like a blue field, is full of sailboats at full mast, the conical shape of
which is mirrored by the women’s pointy hats. As well, the entire color-scheme, even the checkered floor, is done in pink; if the title were not *Alarm* one would imagine this to be a painting announcing revelry or joy.

Image 53: *Woman with Fish*. Oil on canvas. 1946. (No. 138)

In a combination of the previous two works, but also pushing to an entirely level of gaze, we have *Woman With Fish*. Here we can see the wide open and strong, provocative stance of a self-determined woman, a fish caught tightly in her left hand. In her right, upstretched arm, she scatters water, or perhaps grain, down to the ground, down to her right leg that is bent and upturned. It is a feeding, nourishing gesture; a gesture of sustenance for the earth, for herself. The emotions behind *A Good Catch* are here as well: self-sustaining, proud, sovereign. The pinks of *Alarm* are repeated, as is a sailboat in the background, along with the darkened eclipse moon. What differs, starkly, is the literal internal landscape of the figure herself and the fence-like pattern that intercedes between
us. The external and implied chaos that causes *Alarm* here becomes an internalized emotionality.

This figure is composed entirely of tangled yarn-like lines of brightly coloured and interweaving reds, blues, and black, creating an atmosphere of bedlam in an otherwise solitary and proud moment. Breasts askew, thick and full thighs, oversized feet remind us of Picasso. The beach is scattered with fish, as if they lie in the sand waiting to be plucked, and a lone umbrella stands empty and unused in the background. Also in the background, we see the repetition of a sailboat, that, as a vehicle of escape, further implies freedom and movement. Yet foregrounded is a fence – blocking us out or keeping her in. This image creates an open, arms-outstretched invitation while at the same time maintaining a boundary, a distance between us, as if we the viewers and the woman herself are ready for introductions but not quite ready for intimacy.

In *Dancer by the Sea* we see a more structured, detailed, and while abstract and surreal, a more realistic and centered perspective. Instead of abstract female bodies we get a fully fleshed and clothed woman. She becomes tangible for us, fleshed out for us to imagine ourselves more fully in her body than as a work of abstract art. She is reachable, touchable, tangible instead of tangled and boundaried. Michael Welzenbach, in the catalog essay for a Wohlfarth Galleries exhibit (1992) writes that *Dancer by the Sea* is “one of a period series – the late 1940s and 1950s – strongly influenced by the Surrealists, or in any event by dreams and fantasies. They appear to be a sort of collective sorting of emotions and ideas, philosophic and aesthetic. It is during this period that Guccione’s symbolism becomes more and more refined and representational” (20). Not only can we see the influence of her era, but also of her married life and Dominic
Guccione’s taxidermist business. The owl, the duck, the pheasant, and the unknown or un-nameable creatures become animal familiars to the women, just as the pier-like poles become totemic.

Image 54: *Dancer by the Sea*. Oil on canvas. 1949. (No. 030)
There is a movement, a transition – a translation – happening here. It is a subtle shift, but one well worth internalizing. Guccione is moving into a very tangible, very realistic in some ways, female-dominated world. It is a world that has implied structures, as we see in *Alarm*, and has collaborative efforts at society-building, as we see in *A Good Catch*. This next world, of the 1940s, moves us into an Abstract Surrealist world reminiscent of the women and occult themes of Remedios Varo, Leonor Fini and Leonora Carrington. It is a space of magic and power.

It is Guccione’s sister, Irene Pereira, the geometric abstractionist painter of a bit more fame and repute, who once said that if she had to choose a label for herself she identified not as an “artist” but as a “metaphysician” (Bearor 1). While Guccione would never make such a bold identification, there were enough metaphysical books found on Irene’s shelves that were inscribed “Nita Rice” to warrant the conclusion that Guccione, too, was versed in the metaphysical (Bearor 7). In fact, Djelloul Marbrook has written that while Guccione was not much of a reader, but “when she did read it was mostly metaphysical and mystical writings” (JG.com). Really the strongest proof is the paintings themselves. Irene’s intense look into Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, and its ideologies around deciphering the language by which world history and the “memory-pictures” it creates are speaking to us, was Abstract Surrealism and even the Veristic Surrealism of Magritte, Dali and Max Ernst. The idea that images in a person’s subconscious could be directly conveyed onto the canvas and connect us all with a universal language of the soul was Spengler’s notion of the “collective soul.” This connects sharply to Carl Jung’s philosophies of the “collective unconscious” which heavily influenced (along with Freud) the concept of automatism and the Surrealists of
the day. In fact, Joseph Campbell even wrote to Irene Pereira saying that reading Spengler helped him to “to appreciate the force and scope of her work” (Bearor 14). Both Irene and Guccione had an interest in the occult, Orientalism, Kabbalah, and magic. Irene’s identity was much more concrete and public, as she published essays while Guccione remained silent, but the influence is clearly seen. In particular, for Guccione, the concept of Jung’s *anima* is clearly depicted in her work, not as a feminist statement of empowerment as much as a feminine connection to the deeper world she often avoided in superficiality. Guccione’s engagement of the spirit world in her Surrealist works is strongly and loudly heralded as much as she is silent in the actual and tangible world.

![Image 55: And the Song Continued. Oil on Canvas. 1948. (No.177).](image-url)
The anima (from the Latin word for “soul” or “breath of life;” that which animates) is Jung’s concept for the feminine element in a male’s unconscious, often personified in dreams and art by female-laden imagery. I would argue that in the modern era it is distinctly possible, and even more, likely, that the anima is not exclusive to the male unconscious. Women in the modern era are often disconnected from a primordial and inherited image of Woman as well. In this sense, I believe that oftentimes strong and independent women such as Guccione have a deep yearning for an archetypal image to re-connect with and be guided by, particularly when the Surrealists and the era are not as progressive as they might like to think. To this end, perhaps the anima (as the negative attribute in the unconscious) and the archetype (as the positive representation of the collective unconscious) can merge, or at the least, communicate. As Jung states, “The anima no longer crosses our path as a goddess, but, it may be, as an intimately personal misadventure, or, perhaps, our best venture” (Jung 30). Guccione’s “best venture” – her artwork – provides us with both.
In *Don’t Be So Sure* (1946) we see the animal-familiar and the archetypal goddess-woman become one. The primary female character has morphed into her own superhuman archangel. The darkened eclipse has become a silver moon and the exploding, foregrounded, and often silenced sun in a brilliantine sky and heavenly body creates a moment of ecstasy and triumph. This is Guccione’s phoenix. Anne Baring and Jules Cashford write in *The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image* that “The Bird Goddess as the bringer of life appears as a composite image of woman and bird, with an emphasis falling on her long, slender neck and egg-shaped body, imagery familiar from the Paleolithic period. The image of the Bird Goddess as primordial creatrix endures for some 25,000 years, from the thirtieth to the fifth millennium BC” (59). Guccione is
connecting on a deeply primordial level to an archetypal goddess who merges with her animal familiars to become fully empowered and divine. The character and her message seems to say: Don’t be so sure that this isn’t real. Don’t be so sure that this isn’t god or the devil or you. This is what it means to be an embodied woman, and more so, this is what it means to be free.

But Guccione did not want this liberation and transformative type of realization to exist only in another sphere or just in her imaginary world. She takes all of the magic and the exoticism of Don’t Be So Sure, and allows it to exist in a more realistic sphere. In particular, Guccione forces us to take the feelings of empowerment from the divine goddess and put them squarely back into our ordinary female body – a pronounced and exposed and vital body, with any one of our faces.
*She Had Many Faces* (1953) is poignant in its past tense, and is one of the most resonant paintings I think Guccione has done in terms of a feminist aesthetic. It embodies the end of the performativity of gender. The theater-like tattered red curtains are drawn back (on the left with a gold rope reminiscent of an elongated phallus) to reveal a lone and evocative female. Her rainbow-colored gypsy skirt is thrown open to reveal her legs posed flirtatiously to expose a hint of her genitals while her left foot coyly tucks under her right knee. It is a shy remark, making her genitals that much more exposed but in a subtle, flirtatious way. This is the only hint of diffidence. The rest of her is exposed
willingly, almost garishly; her legs are covered in little, round, red circular marks reminiscent of red lipsticked kiss stains on a napkin, her chest is thrown open with her breasts facing forward, gold chains hanging in her cleavage, and her left arm reaches up to rake coquettishly through her wild hair. Even the bead curtain in the midground reminds us of an ageless brothel. What transports us, however, from a pedestrian and mundanely sexualized scene is not only Guccione’s telltale signs – the faceless and powerful woman, the darkening eclipse – but the bag of faces that hangs from the coquettish hand-in-hair. She is the phoenix that completes the transformative process of individuation, and now the masks and personas of her former life can hang limply by her side, caught in a net like Bluebeard keeps his wives in the closet.

Djelloul Marbrook writes that “In the 1960s and 1970s the human figure exits her work by stages, at first becoming fantastical, then deific. A fecund production of watercolors and paintings on canvas begins. The work is powerfully astral and metaphysical. She writes to a purchaser of her works that she paints the world as she sees remotely, distinct from imagining them” (JG.com). An imagined glimpse into an equally freedom-seeking world is *Hot Day Dawning (Two Birds)* (1962). It is a breathtaking glimpse into a woman’s dream by the seaside. The background lines are as technical and soft as Monet’s *Sunrise*, and, with a feminized and softened glance at color in its unblocked formation, the figure becomes as real and venerated as any Matisse. This space is free-flowing and embracing, and has a womb-like sense of enclosure by warm salt water. *Hot Day Dawning* is proof of Guccione’s very real negotiation of reality and imagination, of her seamless interweaving of multiple worlds and perspectives. It is reminiscent of Odilon Redon’s statement circa 1900, “My drawings inspire and are not to
be defined. They determine nothing. They place us, like music, in the ambiguous world of the undetermined.” This woman resides in the ambiguity of the collective unconscious where a reclamation of the anima completes her profound transformation.


As Marion Woodman and Elinor Dickson, both Jungian analysts, discuss in *Dancing in the Flames: The Dark Goddess in the Transformation of Consciousness*, goddess imagery and even the act of goddess worship facilitate the transformation process of not only a woman’s torn psyche but also society’s dualistic predilections. In moving past the binary contradictions of the West – mind/body, male/female, good/evil, even anima/animus – we move to a new space of unity and cohesion, the fluidity of a
transcultural space. Woodman and Dickson write “The soul embodied in matter, manifested by the Goddess as container and transformer, will take us beyond dualism, beyond defensive splits within our psyche if we open up to her energy within us” (44-5).

It is *Hot Day Dawning* that illuminates this liminal space between the “breath of life” and also the “transfiguration of the body,” past what our limited conscious can express as possible for our Self.

This seems precisely where Guccione’s creative perspective goes: so far beyond dualism, and even a transcultural third space where dualism melds and binaries collapse, that the body becomes obsolete.

![Image 59: Fire of the Mystic Eye. Acrylic on canvas. 1960. (No. 194).](image_url)
The male/female, mind/body, real/imagined duality becomes superfluous to an even more internalized negotiation of abstract concepts. The figureheads that had taken on the metaphysical representation of the spirit become instead fine lines, shapeless meanderings, and disembodied eyes that do not need a mind to see.

The colors of Guccione’s 1960s Abstract Surrealist work become ecstatic and vibrant, and help to anchor the viewer in an otherwise disembodied world. *Fire of the Mystic Eye* and *Nautica* are couched in an Abstract Surrealism that is disengaged from her female-dominated world, and yet, there is still something feminine about these large acrylics. In *Fire of the Mystic Eye* there are bursting sunspots that become eyes, abstract shapes that might remind us of buildings, staircases or monuments, but do not stay still long enough for us to actually recognize them.

As Michael Welzenbach writes of her later work,

> No longer do the compositions even purport to focus on several specific objects or images to cement them or give them focus. At last Guccione has reached beyond the figures, faces and personalities of her beloved Bedouin and others who captivated her to grope into the hazy reaches of the immense desert of which they are only a small part, a mere cog in the grand ecology. These more recent works no longer depict the feminine as physical woman, face, figure and curve; rather they deal with the eternal feminine, the ethereal signs and signifiers of femininity. (24).

This phase of her work seems to be the dreams of the feminist dreamers, the subconscious of the anima itself. Case in point are two of her most famous and striking paintings, *Nautica* (1966) and *Harbor of Alchemy* (1975).

*Nautica* is the pinnacle of Guccione’s abstract Surrealism, just as *She Had Many Faces* could be seen as the quintessence of her feminist aesthetic. *Nautica* surpasses feminism in any politicized use of the word, as Guccione continues to reclaim and redefine the feminine in these shadowed and almost genderless forms. These figures float in a world of spirit and myth, suspended on moorless islands, canopied by the ethereal and intangible. Mythical birds greet us in the foreground just as orbs, starbursts and planets light our way. Fragile lines of smoke weave up to the heavens as tents of gossamer give us a hint of home. It is a world that is delicate and comforting in its effortlessness. It is a feminism of feeling, without definition, beyond any conception of the body as we may want it to be defined and boundaried.
In *Harbor of Alchemy*, one of Guccione’s most well-known paintings, we see that the long and narrow female form, combined with past totem poles and columns, become morphed into linear lines that float without moorings in a sunset sea. There is a waxing moon in the upper right, perhaps a signifier that we have moved through an eclipse and into a time of movement. The eclipsed moon has become an unformed circle, the center wheel of a star in the lower right corner. Aligned with this is her signature, simply “Guccione” along with the symbol for “woman.” The images themselves are created by varying shapes and unnameable objects strung from delicate threads; strings of totems, garlands of symbols.

Image 61: *Harbor of Alchemy*. Acrylic on canvas. c.1975. (No. 024)
If alchemy is moving from a solid stone and through the transformative process into the Philosopher’s Stone of immortality, then *Harbor of Alchemy* is where we might realize the final stages of Juanita’s and our own transformative journey. In these works, Self-identity becomes based on collusion with the Other, and this is precisely what Guccione does, she just does it with the mystic.

We have here entered a new kind of transculturalism; one of bridging the space between worlds and spirits rather than ethnicities and cultures. A non-terrestrial language is created, speaking to the mythic rather than the mundane. There is nothing temporal to hold us down, so that when we reach *The Queen of Heaven* we are not surprised by her visit.

Here, we can see her work is becoming much more realistic once again. The curtains are not tattered as in *She Had Many Faces* and there is no undercurrent of dominance or sexuality, yet there are many recurrent themes from her other work. The colorscape is as vibrant as her 1930s work. It is the same rust, saffron, and bright goldenrod of Algeria and of *Harbor of Alchemy*. Similarly, there is the Guccione emblem of the eclipsed moon once again – but even more so, this time multiple moons float lustrously in the blood-orange sky. This is beyond our simple galaxy. Like Selene or the Virgin of Guadalupe before her, *The Queen of Heaven* rests her foot on a moon sliver and is fully embodied in her reign and role. Reminding us of our world, this Queen has a cross symbol across her chest; yet in opposition to the Virgin Mary who is worshipped only as an *image* and never as a voice, these goddesses are figureheads of more than femininity, they are the divine feminine as a manifestation of *our* internal reality. There is no question, no doubt of purpose or intention. By this stage in Guccione’s life, all the women have come together and found belonging.
We traversed past the towns of Algeria, past the bodies and societies of the Otherling women, and nestled down into the divine matrix of the true divine fount. As Baring and Cashford have noted, “the image of the Black Virgin also relates to the realm of the dark moon, the creative depths from which the old light has gone but from which new light is born. Earlier goddesses were on occasion cast as black, as though to summon the heart to the impenetrable mystery of the creative source” (586). If this is the case, then Juanita has truly returned to the creative source, the fountainhead, of her creative process. Baring and Cashford go on to write that through the Black Madonna image “It is as though all the denied feelings of orthodoxy found in their opaque darkness a place to wonder anew at the magical healing powers of nature herself” (588). Through the anima,
through even the shadow self, she has returned to the inner creativity of all that is the mysterious and un-nameable.

Image 64: I am Going Blind. Acrylic on canvas. 1991. (No. 204)

As representative of her last paintings, I am Going Blind shows Guccione’s signature lines and use of color despite the overwhelming use of black. The eclipsed moon most often in the lower right corner is now exploding with cosmic radiance into the blackened columns. This allows the pinks and gunmetal blues to shine even more strongly. It is an image to mark the completion of our journey, the fulfillment of this one life, and for our journey to the Underworld to enter the next life.
Juanita Guccione’s oeuvre spans nearly 70 years of prolific and prodigious images that are truly a conversation between her own inner reality and the external and social world she often retreated from. There is not the least bit of passivity in these paintings; they are dynamic and active, they are engaging, and completely and fully developed. From fashion piracy and travels in Europe she leapt head first into a profound transcultural sojourn in Algeria that deepened as she journeyed deeper into the Sahara. She purposefully and gracefully moved past the ideologies of East and West in order to depict an essence of Algeria beyond the simple territorial boundaries and naming of a nation. This was done so profoundly, in fact, that Algerian Ambassador Jazairy stated: “This is what prompted us to set up in Algeria a museum dedicated to her paintings as a symbol of Algerian-US friendship rooted in the Peace and Friendship Treaty signed 207 years ago between our two nations” (Jazairy). Guccione’s art so profoundly depicts a transculturalism – an envisioning of the “potentials of existing cultures” – that she has become memorialized for her vision and her ability to move past national boundaries and her own national and ethno-social identity.

As Guccione transcended literal and cultural boundaries in Algeria, the modern era propelled her even further into erasing boundaries of the mind and the self. Similarly, while she engaged in WPA realism, Cubism, Dadaism, and of course Surrealism, Guccione moved past the expected identity of eras and artistic genres. She took what she needed from each, and to create her own artistic understanding. Guccione adapted the philosophy of the Surrealists – that we do not need portraiture faces and bodies, that do not even need objects to hold us in place – to force all binaries to find their own conclusions.
Guccione questions the validity of East/West, male/female, gay/straight, and even sanity/madness. This transcultural liminality is experienced not through cultures and ethnicities, but is realized in the Self through emotionality. Her possible bipolar and bisexuality melt into the abyss, as she conjures a world of women who are both feminine and independent simultaneously. These two characteristics should not be at odds, or felt to be at opposite ends of a spectrum of womanhood, but they often are. So that in Guccione’s feminist aesthetic, she re-imagines and re-creates what Woman may be and provides her with a terrain where she can flourish. She depicts a world of feminine sovereignty where there is no need to name or claim one identity over another, no need to declare Woman or Man, strong or vulnerable, and therefore no need to assign labels or social roles according to such arbitrary delineations. This reclamation of the Self is a restoration of our true nature. As Patricia Reis writes in the Forward for Amy Stacy Curtis’s *Women, Trauma, and Visual Expression*, “The work of restoration implies that something of value has been intentionally recovered and rehabilitated, revitalized and returned. Creativity from this perspective is a process of mending the tear in the fabric, an ecological work of deep healing” (15). This happens viscerally, intuitively, as we gaze into the world that Juanita Guccione has created from the depths of her own being. She is communicating her own restoration and return even as she succumbs to blindness, perhaps madness, and then her final passing. But through her images, through her communiques, we see something, we feel through it, and end up Knowing. As E.A. Bennet once said, and to which I think Juanita would whole-heartedly agree: “Only the uninitiated ask what the picture means” (109).
This poem is from Djelloul’s first book of poems, *Far From Algiers*, and published by The Kent State University Press. It won the prestigious Stan and Tom Wick Poetry Prize in 2007.

Irene Pereira is also a fascinating study in extravagance and artistry. From her internationally acclaimed paintings to her parties with William Carlos Williams and Dylan Thomas, Irene is a maverick in her own right. To read more about her, please see Irene Rice Pereira: Her Paintings and Philosophy by Karen Bearor.

Since 2004, the whereabouts of Guccione’s Algerian oeuvre have been a mystery. Dr. Chakib Khelil, then Algeria’s Energy Minister and CEO of Sonotrach, and then Ambassador Idriss Jazairy, pronounced publically that they would build a museum to permanently house Guccione’s work. However, years passed and no such promises came to fruition and the all of the paintings were thought to have been lost. Jazairy attempted to locate them, and when Djelloul went public, the Algerian Press as well put pressure on Sonatrach to find and display the paintings. At last notice, many, but not all of the 174 images, were indeed hanging in Sonatrach’s headquarters in the Hydra District of Algiers (DM 1.14.2012).

In 1941, Juanita had a solo exhibit at the Alma Reed Galleries (juanitaguccione.com). This is important to note because Alma Reed may have been introduced to Juanita through Siqueiros, the Mexican muralist with whom Juanita collaborated for the 23rd Street Post Office mural. Having a link to a Mexican muralist is fascinating because I believe it could allow us to see how Juanita has influences that far outreach the European and American standards, and this in turn may help us to read her work more dynamically.

Kaethe Kollwitz wrote in her diary: “people assert that my one subject is always the unfortunate. Sorrow isn’t confines to social misery. All my work hides within it life itself, and it is with life that I contend through my work.” *The Diaries and Letters of Kaethe Kollwitz*. Ed. Hans Kollwitz. Northwestern University Press, 1988.
CONCLUSION

TRANSFORMATIVE AESTHETICS: WOMEN ON SELF, ART AND BELONGING

My title, a “‘Living Art,’” embodies many foundational concepts that inform my thinking throughout this dissertation. Primarily it comes from both Katherine Anne Porter and Anita Brenner who, unbeknownst to each other, both called Mexican arts in the 1930s “a living art” (Porter qtd in Lopez 127; Brenner Idols behind Altars 174). The idea that both women independently conceived of such a large movement with such a particular phrase began a domino-effect of thinking for me about how fluid yet tangible and plastic the modern arts movement was. Particularly in Mexico, there were very concrete delineations of the movement’s terms, of its intentions, even of its artistic forms and manifestations. Yet there was also an individualized creative impulse that was fostered and encouraged, not in spite of the boundaries, but in part because of them. The context, the politics, the gender roles, the artistic genres of everything from realism to abstract expressionism became breathable, viable, and wholly alive. For a transnational movement covering multiple continents, it is shocking in its intimacy.

From a theoretical standpoint the concept of a living art continues a long lineage of philosophical positions that both inform and complicate my readings of realism, reality, and the real, as well as challenge the ideology of romanticizing that which is “dead” and critique or support the performance and identity of that which is living.

A living art must necessarily take its breath from something or somewhere; in this case, Mary Louise Pratt in Transculturalism and Jean Baudrillard in “Similacra and
Simulations” discuss how the revivification of Native arts implies that they are in fact at one point “dead.” This then allows the colonizer to forge a new historical present without the past and without acknowledgement of other realities.

Further, this “revivification” permits a romanticization of the Native or worker and his/her art because the dead can be repositioned in any capacity; they have no voice, no rebelling movements, no contrary gestures. Romanticization relies upon the old terms staying in place; woman must mean Woman to us all; it must stay a boundaried and solid term that we all recognize or the power of the trope disappears. We must recognize Hine’s A Tenement Madonna instantly and forcefully through an almost subconscious understanding of the mother’s symbolism, the terms that we will call her instead of her
name, and the boundaries by which she is or not is one of us. She – her image, not her – is real to us only by the symbol system through which we judge and read her.

The artists studied here challenged such essentialization, quite possibly with essentialisms of their own, but with a revolutionary intention. Anita Brenner’s concept of “inherited images,” for instance, recognizes a lineage of ideas and aesthetics. But the inherited images do not function as stereotypes or tropes because they are not static, imposed, hierarchical or reinscribing of an authoritative ideology or moment. Instead, these artists are viewing or creating art through their individual agency and a core “structure of feeling” that is playing an active role because these images “are all the time lived” (Williams 129). Instead of a dominant discourse being established through static or dead images, that in fact create the language of the dominant through such a fixed symbol system, here we have a plastic art that through its fluidity is alive and ever-changing of the status quo.

This is how a feminist and working-class aesthetic is created. Such aesthetics are a symbol system of “inherited images” that are fully embodied in language and the material world of the creator, the artist, the mediator. This allows us to revolutionize it. If we recognize and embrace the word Woman and its many representations and manifestations, then surely we can harness it to transform it. These women artists did this in multiple ways, primarily by creating a new sense of self through their lives and through and within their art and the ways they discussed others’ art. But before the creation of aesthetics, we must see how these women fashioned themselves and their conception and manifestation of art.
Pierre Bourdieu’s term “the art of living” refers to the performativity of 19th century artistic circles and the ways artists undertook an ontology and persona for the “style of an artist’s life,” thus weaving their existence into a work of art alongside any of their canvases (Bourdieu 58). Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that “a fundamental dimension of the enterprise of artistic creation” was the invention of the “style of an artist’s life” so that their innovations and creations were written not only into their art but also “into their existence” (Bourdieu 58; Unruh 7).

We can see this individual and cultural transformation happen most specifically in Vicky Unruh’s Performing Women and Modern Literary Culture in Latin America where she argues that women were fashioning their artistic personas in league with either the New Woman who negotiated mass media and consumer culture, or as a political reformer who fights for engaged citizenship, a national sense of family, and the concept of social motherhood (2). These women, on either side, negotiated the modern world as co-creators, not victims or muses, and their public identities, lifestyles, and artistic missions were then the avenue and vehicle for the display of their new selves, as well as a public critique of the social world that held them otherwise static and caged.

This fashioning of new identities, writing styles, and ways of being was uniquely accomplished through “their access to the artistic world derived in part from public performance: theatre, poetry declamation, song, dance, oration, witty display, or bold journalistic self-portraiture” (2). What is even more to the point for my undertaking here is the way in which Unruh’s artists – from theater, journalism, etc. – still needed to use the language and the social mores of the mass audience because they were re-creating themselves in society’s eyes. A play, a spoken poem, an article in the newspaper only
“works” if the audience understands it, speaks the same language and gets the meanings, the punch lines, the dénouements. A communal language, a shared understanding of social mores, and a participatory relationship between artist and audience are requirements for successful performances. We are back again to needing the dominant concept, the trope, of Woman despite any attempts to become a New Woman.

However, in this case, with paintings and photographs, the artist can use her own language, her own mores, and complete her vision without the audience ever fully knowing or participating in its meaning, symbolism, actuality or context. The artist may not become well known, she may isolate and rebuke her audience with such disconnection and abstractedness – this was certainly true for the reclusive and somewhat shunned Juanita Guccione – but she can still “perform” her own art without audience participation for it to “work.”

These artists, therefore, positioned themselves as translators, as emotional revolutionaries, as co-creators to societal constructs and the language that would define their identities. Each painting is a kunstlerroman – it is a portrait of an artist’s coming into being – in a specifically cultural and historicized space that allows for such a reality, for such a particularly female perspective and manifestation. This is itself a feminist act because it asserts such a profound female vision. Additionally, it is a working-class act because these women, whether they were or were not themselves from the working-class, aligned with the working-classes and their “peasant art” for a very specific reason: it gave to them a sense of the real, of something authentic which they did not seem to find anywhere else. In other words, women and the working-classes were being used and romanticized by their old images, as Native, pagan, authentic Mexicans or as an Angel in
the House. Yet these artists, among many others, could then take the same persona, the same image, and co-create it into their own reality, one that was counter to the national homogenizing discourse. They may have also essentialized the Native or the Woman, but they did so with a politicized or personal intention to allow for the transformation of all involved rather than just as a representative iconology. Furthermore, and lastly, this then co-creates a new identity for the nation in which these women produced and displayed and offered their art to the public – an art that was counter to the nation’s already established language around and images of Natives and women. It became a revolutionary act of artistic undertaking. As Anita Brenner once said, it was “painting for ideological repercussions” (qtd. in Glusker 40).

Unruh writes that these women worked out this “art of living” identity within “a contextually specific literary-cultural world and marked by historically specific cultural conversations, dialogues, or debates” (Unruh 8). The renaissance of identity was a particularly 1930s act. In Mexico it was post-revolution, in the US it was during the Great Depression and the blossoming of the WPA and FSA. Many political, social, and economic terms and mores, distinctions and segregations that had been normalized for generations were destroyed. There was a uniquely specific historical and cultural moment in which to create such a personal and national re-birth. A confluence of site specific locales, genres, and socioeconomic factors all allowed for, produced even, a vast and uncompromising re-negotiation of reality.

Unruh further argues that the impact of this historical and cultural specific moment is that such “literary activity and the enactment of an artistic persona constitute not a preconceived project, but to use Bourdieu’s words, the ‘taking up’ of ‘a position to
“be made” (Unruh 8; Bourdieu 76). Each of these women creates a new language by which to understand and communicate around women, Natives, reality, feminism, art; they are each taking up a position to be made for their Selves personally and in society.

The self-referentiality and self-generated symbolism of Maria Izquierdo is a primary example. Izquierdo is a modern woman – a New Woman even – in 1930s Mexico. She is a politically aware and class conscious citizen who recreates her own reality through “the art of living” and on the canvas. We do not necessarily need to know about her past, including her arranged marriage at age 14 and being a single mother to three children, to understand and communicate with her depictions of bodily dislocation and abstractly rendered grief, suffering, and loneliness. But Izquierdo’s art, and her performance of Self, through her self-portraits in particular (displayed by her with kohl-rimmed eyes, indigenous dress and jewelry, etc.) is how she chose to align herself representationally and in reality (it’s how she dressed and acted in real life). This is also then mirrored and performed on her canvases as she chose to paint in “raw materials” while depicting indigenous Mexicanidad and feminist artistic themes. All of this creates a performance of the “art of living” through a “living art” language and symbolism and technique. Her “performance” is self-created and self-determined so that the external representation of her internal reality is creating an entirely new reality for her Self, for Women, for society and for the nation. Her art is then being positioned in society, through mediation in the dominant marketplace, as a depiction of a new feminist identity, a new language that speaks to autonomy and self-validation – in life, in art, and in reality.

Concepts of the real, the usefulness and even necessity of realism in documentary arts of the 1930s (and then the counter revolutionary slide into surrealism), all begin with
the notion that reality itself is not a fixed space but a fluid perspective that can be questioned and challenged and therefore changed. Amy Kaplan in *The Social Construction of American Realism* writes that realist texts do not flee from the “imagination or into nostalgia for a lost past” but actively and consciously construct the “social world they represent; and they do this not in a vacuum of fictionality but in direct confrontation with the elusive process of social change” (9).

This is done in particular not by representing a reality that is objective and mimetic, for that is impossible. Neither is it done through the manipulation of dominant symbols and stereotypes, as that artistically was considered passé, redundant, and territory of the bourgeoisie, and sociologically seen as oppressive and essentializing. Instead, as in William Dean Howells’s perspective, the real could be both an accurate reflection and an agent for social change. In an 1886 *Harper’s* review he famously wrote, “‘Realism becomes false to itself, when it heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it’” (973).

Reality can be an aesthetic experience.
The importance of documentary realism, then, and even simply realism as we see in Tina Modotti, is that it exists in a liminal space between fixed inscriptions of class and gender and overturning the established order that defined those terms to begin with. Paula Rabinowitz writes, “Documentary practice exists in precisely this kind of discursive space. Inside and outside, it is representative: it represents and is representative of cultural formations comprised of bodies and theses – gendered histories. Representation and realism – these are the effects of documentary advocacy” (11).
Representation and realism are connected and fused through the legitimacy of self-validating artistic practice – women and the working-classes could finally start being an authority for themselves. Self-representation is then a wholly new form of realism. This leads these artists to embrace the power and starkness of realism as well as venture into the imaginary where, especially in Surrealism, women could redefine wholly and completely their self and their world. One’s internal landscape is unarguable. And it does not necessarily need an external symbolic system or even audience approval to be corroborated or authenticated. Any reality is necessarily societal, in that it needs a stage or canvas on which to exist, and it requires a gaze, a perspective through which to be seen and create its existence. It must be imagined into being through someone, anyone. The self-referentiality of surrealism allows for the creation of a whole new imagery.

This then leads us to the creation of working class and feminist aesthetics. These artists, among many others in the world, are specifically and determinedly female in their approach to art and their depiction of reality. They are as well decidedly working-class in their upbringing, their adult lives and lifestyles, or by their sympathies. It becomes the lens through which they see and therefore depict the world. Tina Modotti in particular comes to embody both a feminist and working-class aesthetic.

Modotti’s class and gender aesthetics are inextricably tied to each other – her sense of the real, and her desire to depict the masses as a visible reality, with a sense of agency and control over their own self and world.
Bourdieu argues that the working classes do not necessarily produce viable art because they do not like experimentation; such an endeavor or risk requires the possession and comprehension of a code that they do not have, so they prefer art and narratives based on lived experience. Lisa Orr in *Transforming American Realism: Working-Class Women Writers of the Twentieth Century* goes on to say that the implications for reading working class writers and artists then becomes even more important; especially when we are to understand *their* codes. Orr argues that working class women writers have employed “skillful manipulations of genre and representation [that] are experiments (not merely acts of resistance and therefore successful, or acts of assimilation and therefore unsuccessful) denoting agency and sophistication” (Orr 21).
We can therefore see that the ways these women artists are generating a working class and feminist aesthetic is much more subtle and complex, multiperspectival even, than we might first imagine.

When Modotti is re-presenting her subjects in their particular context she is solidifying and concretizing their reality as both classed and gendered. In other words, “bodies and boundaries are fixed and then transgressed in an effort to shore up and subvert social order” (Rabinowitz 11). Her repositioning of the female body and its relationship to society inevitably leads us also to a working class aesthetic. We can clearly see this argument in Georg Lukacs. “For Lukacs, class consciousness within the proletariat is dependent on the working class’s ability to see itself as object and subject simultaneously” (Rabinowitz 38). This applies fully when the artist and the art are only on display or positioned for critique by the dominant discourse. But working-class artists create a reality completely self-identified and go a step further to create an entire aesthetic with its own boundaries and delineations in order to re-present themselves not as subject-object but rather as subject-creator. This then bonds and creates a shared and self-created identity not of tropes but of a collective symbology amongst and for the working classes and/or women.

This connects seamlessly with the Howellsian belief that realism and the depiction of the real is work, it is a kind of labor and a kind of art. With reference to Howells, Kaplan writes that “As a cultural force, realism turns reading into work, an act which unites its practitioners not through the worship of high art or the transport to imaginary worlds but through the mutual recognition of a common identity rooted in the productive sphere” (17). Aesthetics – and the real – create a communal identity, a
common language, by which to confront the dominant discourse and challenge hierarchical notions of power and social class distinctions and divides as well as the privileging of particular forms of art. Dialoguing with reality is a kind of labor, and depicting that reality in the creation of art through one’s individual negotiation of it is a kind of work. An artist’s representation of her internal negotiation of reality is the most real and authentic position she can be in.

Acampora and Cotton in *Unmaking Race, Remaking Soul: Transformative Aesthetics and the Practice of Freedom* argue that counter to an antiquated ideal of art as passive, autonomous, and even rational, today we – particularly women – have access to a creative matrix that calls for the primacy of action. They write, “The core idea of aesthetic agency is that integral to our understanding of the world is our capacity for making and remaking the symbolic forms that supply the frameworks for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge” (5). This “remaking of symbolic forms” allows one’s self and the terms by which we negotiate our Self to change. What makes this renegotiation of Self through art a transformative aesthetic is that “aesthetic agency has immediate applications for the transfiguration of the body, its articulations in the productions of dominant and oppressive cultures, and resistive practices that form the basis of political action” (7).
Acampora and Cotten consider “aesthetic agency as a way of dwelling in a sense that permeates ordinary lived experience and conditions the extraordinary sense of connection to others” (7). These women have employed such agency and created a community with the intention of remaking the symbolic forms that create our world. They knew that as women, as Adrienne Rich states, we have to reckon in and out of gender to do our work, and so they did. This generates a profound kind of restoration for womanhood and labor and art that suffuses life back into the static. As Patricia Reis narrates in Women, Trauma and Visual Expression, “the work of restoration implies that something has been
intentionally recovered and rehabilitated, revitalized and returned. Creativity from this perspective is a process of mending the tear in the fabric, an ecological work of deep healing” (qtd in Curtis 15). These women knew that they wanted to revolutionize how their bodies and their art were negotiated and so they embraced the “inherited images” calling to them and created their own reality. These women artists dwell in the possibilities of the sublime and the real, and then they have gone so much further and created art that is a constellation of Self, language, liberation, knowing and belonging.


--. “Unrequited Comprehension: An Intimate Look at the Paintings of Juanita Guccione.” Juanitaguccione.com

--. Djelloulmarbrook.com


---. DM 08.05.09. Personal Correspondence via email. August 5th, 2009, between Djelloul and Marilyn Marbrook and Tabitha Morgan.


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