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*A Web of Connections: How Early Twentieth-Century American Women Writers and Photographers Situated a New Way of Seeing*

By  
Kristina Krause

Claremont Graduate University  
Fall 2020

## APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION COMMITTEE

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Kristina Krause as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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## **Abstract**

*A Web of Connections: How Early Twentieth-Century American Women Writers and Photographers Situated a New Way of Seeing*

By

Kristina Krause

Claremont Graduate University: 2020

While there are several studies of the relationships and influences between American male photographers and writers, this study examines the lesser known and understudied collaborations and connections between early, twentieth-century American women photographers and writers, beginning around the end of the nineteenth century and extending into the 1930s. The web of connections between women writers and photographers, connections created through influence, through mentorship, through friendship, or through collaboration, provided a space in which they could situate a new way of seeing and defining each other as women and as artists, and it manifested in the empathetic manner in which they presented and interacted with their subjects in photographs and on the page. This new way of seeing also involved the generation of a visual ethics and the application of a gendered aesthetic that broadened the notion of what was worth seeing and representing outside of the predominantly white, male-dominated society's determination of what were acceptable subjects and methods with regard to cultural production.

For example, photographer Gertrude Käsebier's friendship with Native American writer Zitkála-Šá created the space wherein they collaborated on photographic portraits of Zitkála-Šá that refuted the dominant white culture's stereotypes of Native American

women. Willa Cather and photographer Laura Gilpin were connected through a shared passion for the geography and the Native American cultures of the American Southwest and may have inspired each other with their depictions and descriptions of that region, which even prompted Gilpin to suggest a collaboration with Cather to illustrate one of her novels, though the proposed project never materialized. Katherine Anne Porter and photographer Tina Modotti were connected through their involvement in the cultural renaissance in post-revolutionary Mexico in the 1920s and through their depictions of indigenous Mexicans. Finally, photographer Dorothy Ulmann and Julia Peterkin were connected not only through their personal friendship, but also through their commitment to preserve marginalized cultures, specifically rural, Southern African Americans like the Gullah who lived and worked on Peterkin's plantation in the Jim Crow South. They worked together to produce *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, the first collaboration between a woman photographer and a woman writer.

These webs of connection are important because they contributed to the way the work of these artists differed from their male contemporaries. Their webs of connection provided them with opportunities to work together to push against the boundaries of accepted gender norms in the early twentieth century and to create their own identities and histories as artists while resisting the marginalization of their work. They also pushed against the limitations, as defined by the dominant culture, which determined what subjects were considered worth seeing. They accomplished this by featuring non-traditional subjects in photographs or by creating textual portraits of them in fiction and nonfiction using photographic language and photographic references. They did this so that others could see these subjects in new, non-stereotypical ways, subjects who were often members of marginalized cultural groups such as Native Americans, indigenous

Mexicans, and rural, southern African Americans like the Gullah. This interdisciplinary study fills a gap in research with regard to the connections, collaborations and influences between early twentieth-century American women artists and writers and acknowledges their contributions to art and literature. The web of connections between these artists, photographers Gertrude Käsebier, Laura Gilpin Tina Modotti, and Dorothy Ulmann and writers Zitkála-Šá, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and Julia Peterkin, allowed them to support and to help generate each others' work. That web of connections now spans generations, extending into the present day as their work continues to inform and to inspire the work of contemporary women photographers and writers.

## Acknowledgements

This project has been both a challenge and a revelation. The challenge lay in combining several disciplines, history, art (specifically photography), gender theory, and literature. The revelation was where the journey took me in terms of research, unveiling many surprising connections between artists and writers. Through them, I developed an enlarged sense of what is worth seeing and a web of connections of my own between myself and all those who contributed to this project.

First and foremost, I am grateful for the wisdom and patience of my committee chair, Dr. David Luis-Brown, who artfully steered me through this process. Many thanks to my committee members, Dr. Eve Oishi, Dr. Mark Eaton, and Dr. Kathleen Howe, whose generous feedback has been invaluable. Thanks, too, to all the professors throughout what has been a life-long academic journey spanning decades. As an undergraduate at Temple University, Dr. Carolyn Karcher was one of the first professors who encouraged me to consider graduate school, and her guidance launched me further into my academic journey. At Loyola Marymount University where I earned my M.A. in English, there were many professors whose support gave me the confidence to pursue my Ph.D., including Dr. Robin Miskolcze and Dr. Holli Levitsky.

I'm also grateful to all the excellent professors at Claremont Graduate University who have inspired me, particularly the late Dr. John Halperin, whose constant encouragement and generous use of red ink on research papers helped make me a better writer.



Finally, I could not have completed this endeavor without the love, the help and the support from my husband, Joe. He and his cooking have sustained my body and soul through an MFA, an MA, and now my PhD.

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## Introduction

With the growing popularity of photography in the late nineteenth century, American culture moved, as John Dos Passos claimed, from being wordminded to becoming eyeminded (“Grosz Comes to America” 610). Although Dos Passos used this phrase in the article he wrote for *Esquire* magazine in 1936 in response to the drawings of George Grosz, a German artist and Swiftian-style satirist whose interests included depicting “everyday life as he saw it of men and women sleeping, dressing, eating” (616), Dos Passos recognized that in the post-World War I world, “the invention of new ways of seeing things,” including everyday life, was necessary because “old processes and patterns have continually to be broken up in order to make it possible to perceive the new aspects and arrangements of evolving consciousness” (617). In the beginning of the twentieth century, photography gave artists a unique medium with which to create this new way of seeing. As a new visual medium, photography also found itself at the center of a debate not only over whether photographs could be considered art, as photographer Alfred Stieglitz argued (Trachtenberg 172), but also over whether it should be treated as the product of a cold, mimetic machine, or whether it had a positive or negative influence on American culture. While that debate ensued, photography exerted a considerable influence on other media, particularly literature. The term “photography” itself connects to the written word. Coined in 1839 by one of its early developers, John F.W. Herschel (though it may have first been used by Brazilian inventor Hercules Florence), the term photography means “light writing” (Rosenbaum 27).

Regardless of its contentious standing in the visual arts, some critics—including Nancy Armstrong, Stuart Burrows, Paul Hansom, Richard Lehan, and Carol Schloss—consider photography a direct influence on British and American literary realism, naturalism, and eventually modernism at the turn of the twentieth century. Whether they viewed photography positively or negatively, the canonical, male American novelists Dos Passos, Jack London, William Faulkner, and Henry James (to name a few) incorporated a photographic aesthetic into their fiction by utilizing photographic detail and terminology while often including examples of ekphrastic descriptions of fictional, textual photographs used as key artifacts in their narratives. This is also true for some women writers in the early twentieth century, whose work was also influenced by the work of early twentieth-century women photographers, though there are fewer studies of the influence of photography on their work or of the connections between women writers and women photographers at that time, connections that made their work differ from their male contemporaries.

As one example of the influence of photography on the work of John Dos Passos, Dos Passos includes sections in his U.S.A. trilogy called “The Camera Eye” that allow him to use “the camera eye as a safety valve” to filter his “own subjective feelings” about the characters and incidents he describes (interview with David Sanders, *The Paris Review*). This attitude refutes one influential, negative opinion that the camera is merely an instrument of mechanical reproduction by concentrating on the feeling, emotional eye of the person behind the camera.

Likewise, as both a writer and as a practicing photographer, London viewed photography positively and used it as a means to illustrate his belief that one should

“measure manhood less by political aggregations, than by individuals” (from the preface of *The People of the Abyss*), especially when these individuals occupied the margins of dominant Western culture, like the working poor in London during the early twentieth century. He photographed these individuals for his book-length photo essay, *The People of the Abyss*, an exposé meant to reveal the harsh living conditions in which poor Londoners were living. However, he also photographed individuals in the far corners of the world, like Solomon Islander, “Bob,” in 1908. Individuals like Bob were often the inspiration for London’s fictional characters. London’s second wife, Charmian, claims he based his short story “Mauki,” published in 1909, on a cook he met in the Solomon Islands during the Pacific cruise of his ship, the Snark. This story begins with a textual portrait of the character (*Jack London Short Stories*, 730) that is almost photographic in its attention to visual detail. London referred to all of his photographic portraits as important “human documents” (Reesman 10), a term he borrowed from writer Sarah Orne Jewett, who wrote the introduction to a collection of a series of photographic portrait studies and biographies that appeared in *McClure’s* magazine in 1893. She writes, “if we could read one human face aright, the history not only of the man, but of humanity itself, is written there” (vi). While Jewett’s human documents featured portraits that accompanied the biographies of illustrious, successful white men, London’s photographs, as well as his fiction, were informed by this philosophy, like the women writers and photographers that will be discussed in this study. Each photograph London took of poor Londoners or South Pacific Islanders was meant to allow us to read these individuals “aright,” documenting their humanity as well as their particular individual identities.

However, this positive view of photography shared by Dos Passos and London, where photography and photographs function as a means of creating or preserving identity, stands in contrast to the more skeptical, negative views of Henry James and William Faulkner, who maintained that photography contributed to the notion of erasure and the loss of identity. In *A Familiar Strangeness*, Stuart Burrows examines the photographic aesthetic present in the novels of Faulkner and James, explaining how both authors viewed photography as a lowbrow tool of mechanical reproduction that “erodes the differences between people that make identity possible” (103). Burrows then shows how both authors incorporate a photographic aesthetic into their work in order to explore photography’s pejorative influence through the use of fictional photographic images and photographic language. In James’s short story “The Real Thing,” published in 1892, the aristocratic couple who offer their services as models to the narrator, a book and magazine illustrator, reveal they have been photographed “*immensely*” (37). Subsequently, they present faces that are “blank” (37), faces that can be readily reproduced photographically. James suggests that this blankness is affected by being photographed so “*immensely*,” intimating that with each reproduction of their faces, their unique identity is erased. Ultimately, this blankness also makes them unfit as models for the illustrator, a *real* artist believed capable of preserving identity (as opposed to a photographer), but who cannot preserve identities that are now blanks. James later collaborated with art photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn on frontispieces for all his novels. However, in the preface for the *New York Edition* of his novel *The Golden Bowl*, James explains why he chose photographs devoid of people, creating empty stages with

“the actors left out” (James 438), emphasizing his attitude about photography’s capacity for erasure.

Similarly, William Faulkner, although an amateur photographer in his own right, shared James’s concern, seeing photography as contributing to the erasure of history as well as identity. Faulkner viewed photographs as not just a “record of what has been lost” (Burrows 122), but also a record of history that is continually being erased, like the fading photograph of the Sutpen family in *Absalom! Absalom!* Further, not only does photography signify the erasure of history, particularly when an image is devoid of any historical context, it also contributes to the loss of identity. Burrows refers to the blankness of “the Sutpen face” (117), but Faulkner, himself, expounds on this blankness in “On Privacy,” an essay that appeared in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1955. His skepticism with regard to photography is clear when he states that Americans can’t understand why people wouldn’t want their photograph published “in any printed organ” (68) even though being photographed like that reduces them to “identityless integer[s] in that identityless anonymous unprivacied mass which seems to be our goal” (71). Nevertheless, while Faulkner and James were counting “identityless integers,” there were women writers and women photographers at that time who were adopting and implementing their own eyeminded, new way of seeing as a way to create or to preserve identity.

The women writers and photographers working to create this new way of seeing in the beginning of the twentieth century accomplished this by working within webs of connection wherein they developed what I am calling a gendered, photographic aesthetic, a general analytic I use to show how each artist created her own visual and textual

“human documents” that resisted the “identitylessness,” the erasure, and the silencing that results from being relegated, as women and as artists, to the margins of white, male-dominated art and culture. The web of connections and influences between these writers and photographers provided the space in which this new way of seeing could emerge, although it would be situated differently with each artist given individual experiences and circumstances within a larger, complex historical moment. For example, photographer Gertrude Käsebier’s friendship with Native American writer Zitkála-Šá provided the space wherein they collaborated on photographic portraits of Zitkála-Šá, which produced a new way of seeing that refuted the dominant white culture’s stereotypes of Native American women. Willa Cather and photographer Laura Gilpin were connected through a shared passion for the geography and the Native American cultures of the American Southwest at a time when America was looking to Native American cultures of the Southwest for inspiration as it sought to redefine American culture after the First World War. Their depictions and descriptions of that region and the people in it may have inspired each other and may have prompted Gilpin to suggest a collaboration with Cather to illustrate one of Cather’s novels, though the proposed project never materialized. Katherine Anne Porter and photographer Tina Modotti were connected through their involvement in the cultural renaissance in post-revolutionary Mexico in the 1920s and through their depictions of indigenous Mexicans, which encouraged a new way of seeing their subjects as complex individuals and not as stereotypes. Finally, photographer Dorothy Ulmann and Julia Peterkin were connected not only through their personal friendship, but also through their commitment to preserve marginalized cultures, specifically rural, Southern African Americans like the Gullah, who lived and worked on



Peterkin's plantation in the Jim Crow South. These non-traditional subjects appeared in Ulmann's photographs and were featured in Peterkin's prose, portrayed not as stereotypes, but as independent, dignified, complex individuals. The work of these artists is situated within these "webbed connections" that offer "hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing" (Haraway 191, 192), connections that facilitated the creation of a new way of seeing through which they established their identities as artists and preserved the histories of marginalized subjects.

While there are a growing number of projects examining women's contributions to the history of American photography (Judith Fryer Davidov, Naomi Rosenblum, C. Jane Gover, Margot F. Horwitz), there are fewer projects examining the profound influence of photography on the work of early twentieth-century American women writers (Henninger and Wexler). Like Dos Passos and London, women writers, like the ones mentioned here, began using a photographic aesthetic in their narratives, not as a record of erasure, but as a means of constructing their own voice, their identities, and their histories, both as women and as artists, that resisted the marginalization imposed upon them by the dominant, white, male-centered culture. By using photographic portraiture, visual and textual images as well as photographic language, they defied the often stereotypical likenesses of them and their subjects proliferated by the dominant culture, thereby creating their own identities and documenting their lives and the lives of those around them at a time when gender norms, particularly with regard to women's place in American culture, were changing dramatically. The utilization of this gendered photographic aesthetic by photographers Gertrude Käsebier, Laura Gilpin Tina Modotti, and Dorothy Ulmann and writers Zitkála-Šá, Willa Cather, Katherine Anne Porter, and

Julia Peterkin made their work different from their male counterparts as it gave them an unprecedented means to assert their own identities as artists in order to push back against their own personal “identityless” and against the marginalization of any cultural production that was not generated by the dominant white, male culture.

There are three important elements that constitute the general analytic I refer to as a gendered photographic aesthetic. One important element that made their work differ from some of their male counterparts is in their relationship with their non-white, non-traditional subjects and how those subjects are represented in their work. According to Burrows, who has created a broad definition of white, hegemonic otherness, “White middle-class American men project their own similarity to one another—a similarity that is itself the result of the failure to imagine Americans as anything but white—onto the racial other” (155). By generalizing or promoting stereotypes about the “racial other,” “the white American male asserts his own claim to difference” because he has defined “racial other,” often pejoratively as racially inferior, and that “other” is not him. Burrows also maintains that as a result, “Photographic identity thus follows the logic of the stereotype, which judges the subject in terms of a preexisting model” (156) like the models of the savage Indian or the happy Negro. Stephen Menendian and John A. Powell define othering “as a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences” (17), with the “racial other” being the subject who has been marginalized as a result of class, gender, or race. Specifically, I discuss primarily white women artists and women writers and their relationships with their marginalized non-white, non-traditional subjects, including Native Americans, indigenous and working-class Mexicans, and rural, African

Americans such as the Gullah. Unlike some of their male contemporaries, each photographer and writer discussed here traversed the margin between themselves and their subjects, creating a contact zone in which to develop a relationship or a transcultural exchange with their non-white subjects in some way. With regard to the women photographers, they gave their subjects the opportunity to choose how they wanted to be photographed rather than insist they perform according to a “preexisting model.” Davidov suggests that this allowed women photographers to form a “strategy of claiming agency for [themselves] by representing otherness, particularly when it [was] practiced by women photographers emerging from a tradition (into which they at first tried to place themselves) of the history of art that had consistently represented them as other” (6). Women were often objects of the male gaze as opposed to exercising their own creative gaze, but now they were becoming the gazers. This same strategy of claiming agency also applies to women writers. In both photographs and text, the non-white, non-traditional subject is present in some form in all the works discussed here, although the artists’ relationships with their subjects, or the subjects from whom they claimed agency, were inherently complex and varied. Davidov elaborates on this complexity by acknowledging that any act of cultural production involving a non-white subject requires navigating through what is often an unequal power relationship between white women photographers and writers and their subjects of color because of the danger of assuming one is “speaking for those one can only approach” (6). On the other hand, many of the artists discussed here share an experience of being “othered” themselves by having been the subject of a male gaze, which allowed them, in some capacity, “to traverse this separating space” between artist and subject so that one can “perceive another from

within ‘the felt-experience of sentience’” (7). From this position, an exchange facilitated the creation “human documents” or humanized landscapes in photographic print and on paper that presented new ways of seeing these non-traditional subjects.

This is evident in the photographs of Native Americans by Gertrude Käsebier and Laura Gilpin, in images of indigenous Mexicans by Tina Modotti, and in the portraits of the rural, African-American Gullahs in the work of Dorothy Ulmann. Each of the photographers discussed here were also first assistants to male photographers. Some were exoticized or “othered” by the male gaze (Modotti) before they stepped behind the camera lens themselves. As women photographers, they made connections with their subjects, “trading gazes” (Bernardin, Graulich, MacFarlane, and Tonkovich), even though the images produced by that trade “serve as complex and sometimes contradictory markers of cultural exchange” (Bernardin 3), as in the exchange of gazes complicated by race and class between a white, wealthy, upper-class photographer (Ulmann) and poor, rural African American subjects (Gullah plantation workers). Regardless, those images and women photographers themselves were often treated with contempt and criticized by male critics for being technically inferior (Davidov 29) in much the same way that the work of women writers was also minimized by their male contemporaries.

The women writers discussed here also addressed otherness and identity in their narratives using a gendered, photographic aesthetic to push back against being othered by white male cultural dominance. Once famously described as “scribbling women...mak[ing] a show of their hearts as well as their heads” by Nathaniel Hawthorne in a letter to his editor in 1854 (29), women writers and their cultural production were still marginalized at the end of the nineteenth century. Franci Washburn asserts,

“Scholars and interested others have long recognized that the accepted body of canonical written knowledge in the United States is skewed in favor of works produced by white males, while ignoring people of color, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals considered inferior by the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century” (271). Frank Norris demonstrated this view when he claimed in an essay published in *Critic* magazine in 1902 and later collected in *The Responsibilities of the Novelist, and Other Essays*, that there were no great women writers. This is because although they should write better novels than men, having much more leisure time in which to write, they lacked a man’s life experience and the stamina to see a project through to the end. Ultimately, the woman writer would begin to “feel her nerves, to chafe, to fret, to try to do too much, to polish too highly, to develop more perfectly. Then come fatigue, harassing doubts, more nerves, a touch of hysteria occasionally, exhaustion, and in the end complete discouragement and a final abandonment of the enterprise” (237, 238). In two short decades after Norris made this statement, women novelists were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, including three of the authors discussed here: Willa Cather, Julia Peterkin, and Katherine Anne Porter. All three writers addressed “otherness” by including Native American, indigenous Mexican, or African-American characters and motifs that play pivotal roles in their narratives stemming from what Deborah Gordon describes as part of the “search for different ways of being white and female” at a time when the definition of American culture in the 1920s, including the definition of gender roles, was being called into question. On the other hand, Zitkála-Šá used her otherness to challenge racial and gender norms as one of the first Native American women writers to establish her identity in opposition to the preexisting models of Native Americans and, specifically, as a way to criticize white

racial stereotypes of Native American women. In each case, though, these women writers used a gendered photographic aesthetic in different ways that allowed them to claim agency by representing their non-white subjects as a means to create identity, to preserve history and to prevent the erasure of marginalized subjects.

The origin of this impulse toward claiming agency through non-white or indigenous cultures was grounded in a national effort to redefine American culture after the First World War. An overlapping occurred between “anthropological discourse and the discourse of cultural criticism in the early 1920s” (Stocking 287) as a result of a desire to avoid association with European culture as well as to throw off the “worn-out values of the ‘puritan’ tradition, or the hypocrisy of small town Babbitry, or the acquisitive commodity culture” (286). The ultimate goal, taken up by anthropologists, ethnographers, artists and writers, was to advance toward “finally, realizing a civilization that would truly embody the maturing American experience” (286). It’s important to note that many of the anthropologists and ethnographers (scientists who record their personal experiences with the culture they are studying) attending to this project were women who were beginning to enter these male-dominated sciences just as women were also establishing careers as photographers and writers. In fact, Laura Gilpin photographed one of the women anthropologists, Ruth Underhill, whose work focused on the Indians of the Southwest and whose children’s book on the Navaho contained a couple of Gilpin’s photographs. The overall goal of redefining American-ness was to construct a “civilization that would truly embody the maturing American experience” manifested in an intellectual search for some kind of “genuine culture” (290), which is a cultural group still vitally connected to the land where individual members were interconnected with

each other. These cultures were perceived as devoid of the corruption and hypocrisy of industrialized civilization. Examples of genuine cultures were found among indigenous communities in the American Southwest and in Mexico. This search also included a pointed aesthetic interest in indigenous cultures for their “primitive vitality,” which then inspired communities of artists that formed in areas like Greenwich Village in New York, Santa Fe and Taos in New Mexico, and south of the border in and around Mexico City. These artists used this primitive vitality to inform their own cultural production and, like Dos Passos claimed, to break up the “old patterns and processes” in order to push against restrictive societal norms, including gender norms. Photography played a vital role in this cultural redefinition as it was an art form that was pushing to be recognized as a legitimate form of artistic expression, and it also provided a means to document the cultures occupying “particular exotic places” (Stocking 292) like indigenous communities. If, as Roberta McGrath asserts, “Taking a photograph is a way of making sense of the world” because it “imposes an order, a unity upon the world which is lacking” (*Illuminations* 264), photography provided the perfect medium for American culture seeking to make sense of the world and to recreate a sense of itself following World War I. Even more importantly, photography provided a medium for artistic expression and employment for women as they, too, were redefining their place in the broader culture, seeking to define themselves as artists. Photography provided a language that women writers would employ to the same end, to create a new way of seeing and to determine what was worth seeing.

The use of photographic language or a visual grammar in creating a new way of seeing is one of two other elements that constitute a gendered photographic aesthetic.

However, it's important to understand that I use the term "gendered" here as opposed to a feminist aesthetic. I agree with Claire Raymond who evaluates the pitfalls of essentializing and states separating women artists as a category can create a "ghetto of the feminine" (6). Raymond also quotes Abigail Solomon-Godeau who wrote about the risks of "grouping works produced by people whom others interpret as women...who may (or may not) interpret or categorize themselves as women" (7). Yet, does gender influence artistic creation? If gender, as opposed to mere sexual difference, is defined as a product of a combination of biology, culture, and class, it certainly plays a role, as does race, in what and how artists create. When the dominant culture restricts access to materials and professional training or when it limits exposure or inclusion in the historical canon of literary or photographic cultural production, which often privileges the work of white men within a Western, phallogentric culture, that also affects what and how artists, particularly women artists, create. Gender also informs the organizing philosophy, or aesthetic, around an artist's or a culture's definition of art and beauty that determines what is worth seeing and worth representing.

The organizing method applied by both the women writers and photographers that I discuss includes a second element that works within a gendered photographic aesthetic involving using what Susan Sontag refers to in her seminal work, *On Photography*, as a "visual code" or a "grammar" that constituted an "ethics of seeing" (3). This visual code incorporated carefully chosen images of their subjects that were deliberately composed to depict or describe what was worth seeing and representing, whether the images were ekphrastic descriptions of fictional photographs (a character's family photo album in Cather's *My Ántonia*), or textual imagery presented using photographic references



(describing the mind as a lens) and photographic language (describing a flash of insight like a camera flash). For the women writers at that time, this language was instrumental in allowing them to create their own identities as artists through the portrayal of their subjects. For both writers and photographers, a gendered photographic aesthetic also enabled them to “alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe” (Sontag 3) as in Porter’s efforts to introduce American culture to indigenous Mexican folk art, as well as to preserve histories that might otherwise be forgotten, as evident in the collaboration between Ulmann and Peterkin to document the lives of rural African Americans and the Gullah community. By creating work that moves beyond normative cultural production and expanding what is worth seeing, Pollock suggests the work of women artists are actively “differencing the canon” (*Vision and Difference* xxxi) by not reifying differences between genders, but by offering and allowing differences in self-knowledge, in how one represents what one sees in the world.

The third, and possibly most important, element of this aesthetic lies in a web of connection, which often overlaps with the way women photographers and writers form their relationships with and form their representations of their subjects. This web of connection was formed through shared conversations and influences between these artists as well as between the artists and their subjects, often resulting in a cooperative exchange or, in some cases, a direct collaborative approach to cultural production, such as the project produced by Doris Ulmann and Julia Peterkin, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. However, even if there was no direct collaboration, photographers and writers supported each other through salons, through their shared interests and experiences, through studying with or

mentoring other artists. Gertrude Käsebier was both a role model and mentor for Gilpin. Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá, Laura Gilpin and Willa Cather shared a passion for the American Southwest. Käsebier and Gilpin spent a significant amount of their childhoods in the West, while Cather later traveled to these regions as an adult. Because Cather and Gilpin shared a common interest in the geography and the Native American cultures of the American Southwest, Gilpin proposed a collaborative project with Cather involving creating an illustrated edition of one of Cather's novels. That project never came to fruition, but Gilpin's proposed collaboration indicates the influence that Willa Cather's work had on her. Finally, it was not uncommon for writers to travel in the same circles with other artists at that time, like Katherine Anne Porter and Tina Modotti in the highly charged, cultural and political scene in Mexico in the 1920s. They were described as friends and likely knew of each other's work as they were also members of the community of artists in and around Mexico City during the post-Mexican revolution era. They also worked on an exhibition catalog to accompany an exhibit of Mexican folk art, all of which contributed to a shared visual grammar between them, though their individual responses to the political environment in Mexico greatly differed.

However, while all the women writers and photographers I discuss used a gendered photographic aesthetic in order to challenge the dominant culture's gender norms that racialized or placed strictures on women's social behavior and limited women's cultural production, they expressed this aesthetic or enabled each other to do so in varying ways and in varying degrees within specific historical and cultural contexts. For example, the two women artists I discuss in the first chapter, photographer Gertrude Käsebier and Native-American writer Zitkála-Šá used a gendered photographic aesthetic

in different ways in their depiction of traditional forms of womanhood and motherhood. Käsebier's gendered aesthetic was initially informed by her strong, traditional sense of motherhood, which she expressed in romanticized images of domestic space, as in one of her most famous images, "Blessed Art Thou Among Women." This image depicts a mother tenderly attending a child. However, motherhood did not keep Käsebier or her photography confined to the domestic sphere as the dominant culture dictated, nor did it keep her from expressing more strident criticisms of traditional motherhood and marriage. In an article by Giles Edgerton (a.k.a. Mary Fanton Roberts) in *The Craft* magazine appearing in 1907, Käsebier explains: "My children, and their children, have been my closest thought, but from the first days of dawning individuality, I have longed unceasingly to make pictures of people, not maps of face, but pictures of real men and women as they know themselves, to make likeness that are biographies, to bring out in each photograph the essential personality that is variously called temperament, soul, humanity" (reproduced in *Camera Fiends & Kodak Girls* 178). Later in her career, her image "Yoked and Muzzled—Marriage," depicting two yoked beasts of burden, speaks volumes about how her attitude toward traditional marriage had changed. Aside from Käsebier's reference to motherhood, this is the aesthetic, shared by Gilpin, Modotti, and Ulmann, that informed the making of photographic "likenesses and biographies" of real, often marginalized people, like Käsebier's portraits of Zitkála-Šá. Käsebier's portraits of Zitkála-Šá involved a direct collaboration produced by an intimate connection between these two women artists.

While Käsebier's aesthetic and construction of womanhood initially incorporated the dominant culture's exaltation of traditional motherhood, Zitkála-Šá expressed the

gendered aesthetic much differently. She created a visual autobiography in both her portraits and in her writing in order to reclaim her racialized, gendered identity and to refute the preexisting visual models imposed upon her by the dominant white culture that, unlike Käsebier, saw her only as a stereotype. To some extent, Käsebier's commitment to make soulful, visual biographies of real people dovetailed with Zitkála-Šá's desire to represent her real identity as an educated, musically proficient, mixed-blood Native American woman, which she accomplished through a visual grammar that involved posing with both Native-American and non-Native American props. In one portrait, she wears a Native-American costume and her long hair (once cut short against her will as part of the de-culturalization of Indian students at many Indian schools) streams down her profile. In another, she dons a long, white European-style dress, her hair is pulled back in a bow, and she holds her violin. The violin is significant because besides being a successful teacher and orator, Zitkála-Šá was a gifted musician who was trained by and played with the New England Conservatory of Music. These images of her stand in stark contrast to the images produced by western photographers who often made Native-American women disrobe "in the aid of prurient commercialism" (Lippard 32).

On the page, Zitkála-Šá used a gendered aesthetic in her *American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* to create detailed textual portraits of herself and of Native American womanhood and motherhood. For example, she describes her mother as a selfless, affectionate, devoted guardian, nurturer, and mentor, an image that fits the dominant culture's definition of motherhood, except that she is describing a Native American mother in a way that indicts the dominant culture's racialized stereotypes of Indian women. She also includes stories featuring women characters, such as Tusee in

“The Warrior’s Daughter,” women who are strong, brave, intelligent, and dignified. These textual portraits provide a startling contrast to the patronizing, sometimes brutalizing, “civilized,” characters of the white teachers at the Carlisle Indian School, who reflected the dominant culture’s view of Native Americans as savages. So, too, writers like Cather, Porter, and Peterkin employ a similar gendered aesthetic in the creation of strong female characters who reclaim or create their identities in order to resist the erasure inherent in the dominant culture’s gender norms for women, particularly women of color, often using photographic language or creating textual, fictional portraits as key narrative elements (in Cather’s *My Ántonia*, Ántonia’s family photographs refute the history and identity imposed upon her by the narrating main character, who represents the dominant culture’s attitudes about gender norms).

This study examines the collaborative influences and the network of connections between these women photographers and writers: Gertrude Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá; Laura Gilpin and Willa Cather; Tina Modotti and Katherine Anne Porter; and finally, Doris Ulmann and Julia Peterkin. Their works span a period in history from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s and 40s, a time when photography itself was struggling to emerge from the “othering” it experienced, seen as an inferior art form as compared to more established art forms like painting and sculpture, in order to claim its own identity as legitimate art. Their shared gendered, photographic aesthetic had a profound impact on their work, and their work constitutes a legacy that has inspired following generations of female photographers and writers. In addition, I also bring into focus the marked absence of their work in the historical canon of literature and photography. This issue is paramount because, as Naomi Rosenblum claims in her history

of women photographers, “To a greater degree than in the other visual arts, photography has played a role in determining how various aesthetic, political, and social issues have been perceived within a culture, and among these issues has been the changing role of women” (11). Given this role that photography played in changing the perception of a culture, there are four key questions related to how photography specifically informed the work of the women artists discussed here: (1) How did some women photographers use a camera differently than their male contemporaries in the early twentieth century? (2) How did the visual language women photographers constructed influence women writers at that time? (3) How was gender an influence in the development of a photographic aesthetic and cultural production specifically for these writers and photographers? (4) Finally, how did their webs of connection create the space for creating these new ways of seeing, and how did that become a factor that informed their resistance to erasure? The answers to these questions are multivalent, involving a scrutiny of aesthetics and gender, race and class within the context of this historical period. It wasn’t until the 1960s and 70s that women artists and art historians began having broader conversations about these kinds of questions concerning the role of women in the arts, challenging gender bias in art, art history, and art theory (Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock). Even in the twenty-first century, questions concerning women’s roles and gender bias with regard to cultural production persist. In an article in the September 2015 issue of *Photo District News*, Sarah Coleman quotes photographer Maggie Meiners: “I feel women are really, really under-represented in photography, commercially, editorially and in the fine-art world” (28). However, what’s remarkable is that contemporary women artists are saving previous generations of women artists from obscurity while also drawing strength from

the legacy of some of the artists discussed here, thereby forming new and wider webs of connection.

In fact, contemporary women writers have even begun to adopt the stories of women photographers into their work, like Elena Poniatowska's fictionalized biography of Tina Modotti, *Tinisima*, or Whitney Otto's novel, *Eight Girls Taking Pictures*, a multi-generational narrative about eight women photographers that draw on the lives of photographers like Imogen Cunningham, Dorothea Lange, and Tina Modotti, women who were also connected to or contemporaries with Gertrude Käsebier, Laura Gilpin, and Doris Ulmann. Myla Goldberg recently published the novel, *Feast Your Eyes*, a narrative that evokes the lives and works of Berenice Abbott (a contemporary of Doris Ulmann), Diane Arbus, and Sally Mann. These writers continue to apply a gendered, photographic aesthetic in writing about these foundational women photographers and thereby continue to build upon the new way of seeing these artists developed. They also continue to define and redefine what is worth seeing, who is worth seeing, and who is worth acknowledging within the history of American cultural production.

Having identified this gendered aesthetic, I repeat, I am not asserting an essentialist approach to either gender or aesthetics. My methodology will incorporate an examination of gender and its relationship to aesthetics and cultural production within specific geographies and within a historical timeframe from roughly the late 1800s to the 1940s. What makes the gendered aesthetic used by women photographers and writers in this specific historic, cultural context, different from the male aesthetic involves many factors. First and foremost, in the early twentieth century, both women's photography and writing tended to be produced primarily in the margins of a male-dominated culture that

privileged the cultural production of mainly white male artists, writers, and photographers. Therefore, it was necessary for women writers and photographers to create a gendered aesthetic to establish a new way of seeing. Liz Heron and Val Williams explain the importance of this new way of seeing in the introduction to their book *Illuminations, Women Writing on Photography from the 1850s to the Present*, saying “new ways of seeing have had to be stubbornly pursued in order to readjust dominant gendered perceptions...of race and class” (xiii). For example, while some photographers, such as Edward Curtis, arguably perpetuated racial and gender stereotypes of Native Americans, Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá collaborated to challenge those stereotypes.

Other factors contributed to the development of this “new way of seeing.” First and foremost, there were more and more women emerging as part of a class of “New Women”<sup>1</sup> in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women choosing to push beyond established gender norms, leaving the private sphere for the public sphere. The women writers and photographers discussed here used their art to push beyond gender norms, to reach outside of the margins to define themselves not just as wives and mothers, but as artists. Women photographers accomplished this by stepping behind a camera rather than remaining as subjects standing in front of a male photographer’s lens. This act facilitated a shift away from the dominant male gaze and broadened the notion of what was worth seeing. Similarly, Donna Haraway also asserts, “Struggles over what will count as rational accounts of the world are struggles over how to see” (194), and, we might add, how to be seen or represented. This is why women photographers and writers worked to create their own “rational accounts of [their] world” that made themselves and their experiences visible within a culture that facilitated their identitylessness, particularly



with regard to cultural production. Thus, they have succeeded in “differencing the canon” (Pollock) that placed value primarily on the cultural production of white males.

Most importantly, as mentioned previously, the visual grammar at the core of their gendered photographic aesthetic constitutes a shared conversation (images influencing text, text influencing images), and a transcultural exchange, a trading of gazes, accomplished through a network of direct or indirect connections. Originally coined by Cuban scholar Fernando Ortiz in his book *Cuban Counterpoint* as a means to describe the historical evolution of Cuban culture, the term “transculturation” describes the “different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another” (102) through (sometimes violent) exchanges between members of the “sovereign centers” and members of the “dependent peripheries” (Coronil, introduction to Duke University Press Edition, *Cuban Counterpoint* xiv). Similarly, Mary Louise Pratt claims that transculturation is a phenomenon of the contact zone that occurs when there is a cultural exchange between a subjugated people and the dominant culture (7) like the exchanges between women writers and photographers and their non-white subjects. In the beginning of the twentieth century, women occupied both the “sovereign centers” and the “dependent peripheries,” particularly as women’s roles were in transition regardless of race or economic status. Further, while women artists were relegated to the margins of a dominant white male culture, those margins became contact zones between photographers, writers, and subjects of other races and cultures. However, my use of the term aligns more closely with Donna Haraway’s notion of transculturation as “the possibility of webs of connections” (191). The exchanges between women writers, photographers, and their subjects were often facilitated through a network of connections

and collaborations, creating exchanges that went beyond the gazer and the gazed-upon, often becoming a shared gaze though there were varying degrees of exchange, not all of them equal.

Further, in addition to addressing the webs of connections and examining, as Laura Wexler puts it, “the strengths and limitations of gender as an instrumental force in the field of vision” (14), I will show how photographic vision influenced and was influenced by narrative vision. Wexler goes on to argue that these early twentieth-century women photographers produced their work through employing a gendered “innocent eye,” that perpetuated a domestic, imperialistic violence, rather than an exchange, when they focused their lens on subaltern subjects (7). I argue that while an examination of both women’s photography and writing in the early twentieth century cannot ignore issues of gender, race, and class, Wexler ignores the evidence of transcultural exchange, that web of connection that facilitates a sharing of gazes between artists and their subjects. The fact that women photographers and writers experienced marginalization themselves granted them a “right to see,” a way of claiming agency through their marginalized subjects as Davidov asserts. In addition, Davidov claims that a “successful collaboration between model and artist in such constructions has to do not only with making art, but with making—or remaking—identity” (60). Such collaborations allowed for the creation of histories and identities on both sides of the exchange, even if the exchanges weren’t always equal.

Finally, what may ultimately differentiate early twentieth-century women photographers from their male counterparts manifests in the way women photographers connected with and interacted with each other and with other artists. Rosenblum explains:

“In a field [photography] where competitiveness was usually the norm, women often adopted a different outlook...many women urged cooperation, actively supporting their female colleagues by offering advice on matters both practical and emotional” (11), such as Käsebier did for many women photographers, including Laura Gilpin. To appreciate the opportunities that photography provided for women in the early twentieth century, both artistically and economically, it’s important to consider both the historical and cultural context of photography as well as the historical and cultural context of women’s roles.

In the twenty-first century, we live in a world overwhelmed by visual images, where nearly everyone has access to digital photography on their cell phones. In contrast, early cameras in the mid to late nineteenth century were bulky and heavy. Photography required monetary resources, the strength to handle the equipment, and the ability to mix the chemicals necessary for film development, the last two frequently provided by servant labor. All of these factors made the field of photography initially less accessible to women, though there were women practicing photography in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. In the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, cameras became more affordable and available to the general populace when Kodak produced cameras that were smaller, more portable, and less expensive than the earlier cameras used mainly by male, professional photographers. Kodak marketed these smaller cameras specifically to upper- and upper-middle-class women at a pivotal time in women’s history when women were, as Davidov claims, moving toward “increasing visibility (or ability)...in political, social, and literary spheres” (24). Hutchinson adds, “Photography did not require the years of academic training that other

careers did, which would require women to neglect their family responsibilities” (*The Indian Craze* 150). Thus, the camera provided women the opportunity to both work within and also to step outside of the private sphere to produce a visual record of their own lives and the lives of others. More importantly, the camera facilitated the creation of a gendered aesthetic that allowed women photographers, both amateur and professional, to create or preserve their own identities or histories through photographic images. For example, photos could be gathered into photo albums, like the one Cather’s character *Ántonia* creates in *My Ántonia*, which symbolizes *Ántonia*’s act of authorship over her own life. Up until the album is introduced in the narrative, the male protagonist has defined *Ántonia*’s history, her identity, and her life. Naomi Rosenblum adds that the practice of photography also encouraged pride and self-knowledge as “the women who entered the field in the late nineteenth century praised the medium’s potential to grant them a measure of control and purpose in life” (Rosenblum 11). However, it’s important to note that the photographers discussed here did not use Kodak cameras made for the masses. They used professional cameras, but they benefited from similar technical changes that produced more compact cameras and lenses as well as access to dry plates and roll film. They used the new developments in photography to create photographic portraits in order promote their identities as a writers and artists, thereby generating authorship over their own lives.

In addition to authorship, more compact cameras and lenses also provided some female photographers like Käsebier, Gilpin, and Modotti with an opportunity to achieve economic independence not just by working for male photographers but also by working as photographers themselves. Doris Ulmann is an exception as she came from a wealthy

New York family and began studying photography as a hobby (Jacobs 17). However, other women who were once models in front of the camera, like Tina Modotti, or who worked as technicians in darkrooms for male photographers, like both Modotti and Käsebier, could now step behind a camera of their own. Further, Davidov asserts that the act of stepping behind the camera allowed the woman photographer to “make a space for [her]self” that she alone controls, the camera providing her a means for “finding [her] voice” (86). Women also formed camera clubs, which became important “social networks for women in preindustrial societies, networks that provided a means of supporting and reconstituting one another” (88). From within those networks, professional photographers like Käsebier worked as mentors to other aspiring women photographers, including Willa Cather’s friend, photographer Alice Boughton, and their mutual friend, the landscape photographer Laura Gilpin.

In the following chapters, I examine in detail the many interwoven influences, collaborations, and connections between women writers and women photographers. In doing so, I will also show how those influences and web of connections contributed to the gendered, photographic aesthetic that manifested in fictional photographic images and language and how that aesthetic played a crucial role in the creation of female history and identity. For example, Willa Cather’s novels *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, *The Professor’s House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* include photographic language and fictional photographs as a means of creating female history and identity. Conversely, while most of my analysis focuses on the influence of photography on women writers, Willa Cather’s literary landscapes had an influence on Southwest landscape photographer, Laura Gilpin, who proposed an ultimately unsuccessful collaborative

project between herself and Cather brokered by their mutual acquaintance, Alice Boughton. With regard to connections with their Native American photographic subjects, Laura Gilpin and Gertrude Käsebier developed personal relationships with them, often letting them pose themselves, as Käsebier did in collaborating with Zitkála-Šá, with whom she shared a friendship. Unlike other photographers of Native Americans at that time, such as Edward Curtis, Käsebier encouraged Zitkála-Šá to choose how she wanted to be represented in a photographic image. At the same time, Zitkála-Šá wrote her autobiographical *American Indian Stories* choosing to create textual images of Native Americans that resisted cultural stereotypes, as well as to create and validate her own identity as a mixed-race Native American woman and writer. It is also possible, that Käsebier may have aided her in creating those textual images when she transcribed some of her stories (Michaels 42).

Across the southern border of the United States, Tina Modotti and Katherine Anne Porter were connected as members of a close community of writers and artists in post-revolutionary Mexico in the 1920s, a community whose work, which included the elevation of indigenous Mexican art, helped to form and define the national identity of Mexican-ness. Katherine Anne Porter's work was greatly influenced by Cather's and her short stories "María Concepción" and "Hacienda" make similar use of references to fictional photographic images and photographic language to meditate on female and cultural identity. Her textual images also include details that evoke the photographic images that Tina Modotti produced of working-class and indigenous Mexicans. Modotti's initial connections with other photographers were formed through her association with male artists like Edward Weston, her mentor and lover, but she would later make brief

connections with other female photographers, brief because Modotti's own photographic career waned after her deportation from Mexico. However, her work would influence one of Mexico's female photographers, Lola Alvarez Bravo, wife of and assistant to Manuel Alvarez Bravo (who photographed Porter), another member of the artists' community that also included notable painters Frida Kahlo and muralist Diego Rivera.

While Porter and Modotti endeavored to help redefine the cultural identity of post-revolution Mexico, Doris Ulmann, also influenced by Käsebier and who studied photography at the Clarence White school as did Gilpin, sought to preserve the cultural identity of rural African Americans, including the Gullah culture of South Carolina, through her photographs. Ulmann also produced photography projects documenting other marginalized groups such as the Appalachian culture, but it was her images of the rural Gullahs that accompanied the text produced by her friend, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Julia Peterkin, in their groundbreaking collaborative project appearing in 1933, *Roll, Jordan Roll*. This was a project that predated the more well-known collaborative project between writer James Agee and photographer Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

All of these women worked within a large web of connection wherein they applied a gendered, photographic aesthetic to develop a new way of seeing in order to resist their own marginalization and erasure within a patriarchal culture that privileged white male cultural production. While Susan Sontag claims that by the 1920s "the photographer had become a modern hero, like the aviator and the anthropologist" (90), these occupations, including photography, were still dominated mainly by white men. Nevertheless, these women left a legacy, although not as widely known, that continues to

influence contemporary women writers and photographers for whom the issues of gender, art, and cultural production remain salient.

In the first chapter, I introduce one of the architects of the web of connections between women photographers, a female matriarch of American photography, Gertrude Käsebier. Her inclusion in Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession movement, which was the first organization to promote photography as an art form in the United States, put her in a unique position to aid other emerging female photographers. She not only encouraged and supported the work of photographers Doris Ulmann and Laura Gilpin, but also that of Alvin Langdon Coburn, who also apprenticed in her studio. Coburn collaborated with Henry James on the frontispiece for an edition of James's novel, *The Golden Bowl*. Käsebier's photographic influence is evident in the autobiographical writing of Zitkála-Šá, one of the first female Native American authors. As previously mentioned, Zitkála-Šá and Käsebier were not only personally acquainted, Davidov points out that Zitkála-Šá "was one of several American Indians with whom Käsebier encouraged a familiar relationship" (101). Zitkála-Šá and Käsebier collaborated on the portraits Käsebier took of her, as Käsebier did with other Native Americans within the contact zone of her studio. This is significant because these transcultural collaborations occurred at a time when Native Americans were being defined both visually and physically as a "vanishing race" by well-known male photographers like Edward Curtis, while at the same time, Native Americans were also being fetishized by the dominant white culture. On one hand, it can be argued that Käsebier benefited from or participated in that fetishization known as the "Indian Craze" (Elizabeth Hutchinson) by photographing the Native Americans in Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show*. However, she also published photographs of Native-



Americans alongside original Native-American artwork in an article for *Everybody's Magazine*. This act was unprecedented in two ways: 1) she positioned Native-American cultural production on a level equal to her own, and 2) her portraits of Native-American men inverted the usual formula of the male artist's gaze involving the "male pursuer and female pursuee" (155). In addition, a close examination of many of her portraits of Native Americans reveals details that indicate the act of photographing them was a collaborative effort, an effort that produced images Käsebier did not sell in spite of the commodification of Native American culture.

Evidence of this kind of photographic collaboration, the trading of gazes, was even more evident in her portraits of Zitkála-Šá. Käsebier encouraged Zitkála-Šá to create her own visual identity, giving her the opportunity to choose a "visual grammar" of her own by choosing a wardrobe and props that resisted American culture's stereotype of the Indian. Conversely, Edward Curtis meticulously removed any items from Western material culture in his compositions, like the one titled "Vanishing Race," in order to preserve and perpetuate the image of the Native American as the "noble savage." In contrast, Zitkála-Šá chose to wear and hold decidedly European items for some of her portraits, items that connote "civilization" in order to challenge Curtis's and the dominant culture's perception of Native Americans as savages. At the same time, she also extended her resistance to erasure or "vanishing" in her essays and stories, later collected into one volume, *American Indian Stories*. In this diverse, sometimes autobiographical collection, she challenges racial and gender stereotypes of Native Americans and Native American women not only by using eyed-minded language to create strong, intelligent female Native American characters, but also by publishing her work under the Sioux name she chose for

herself, a name that means “Red Bird” in her native Lakota language. Born Gertrude Simmons, she published accounts of her life, essays, stories, and poems under her chosen Sioux name, Zitkála-Šá, deliberately establishing her identity both as a Native American woman and as a writer. Native American writers, more particularly Native American women writers, occupied deeper recesses in the margins of the dominant culture with regard to cultural production, and Zitkála-Šá was severely censured by the founders of the Indian school who first educated her for writing and publishing her stories, some of which were critical of the school and its teachers. Although Käsebier enjoyed greater success and far less criticism, she moved beyond creating images of traditional, romanticized femininity in order to create her visual biographies of real people, like Zitkála-Šá. Through their collaboration, both artists successfully reached beyond the cultural norm where women were, as Hutchinson states, “encouraged to use art to cultivate their sympathy for children and their facility for offering moral instruction” (150). Though not the kind of “moral instruction” the dominant culture encouraged, Zitkála-Šá eventually used her writing to advocate for Native American rights as Käsebier continued to encourage women photographers to claim darkrooms of their own.

In the second chapter, I examine the gendered, photographic aesthetic as it is applied in Willa Cather’s novels *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, *The Professor’s House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and the connections she makes between landscape, identity, and art. In *My Ántonia*, Cather uses a gendered photographic aesthetic to create the character of Ántonia, a strong woman of the soil, a Bohemian immigrant living and working on the Nebraskan prairie. The textual portraits of the landscape that Cather presents in this novel, as well as the landscape in *The Song of the*

*Lark*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* present evidence to suggest that her novels influenced the work of landscape photographer Laura Gilpin. There's also evidence to suggest that Gilpin's work may have influenced Cather's as well. In Cather's later work, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, there is less of a photographic aesthetic, but the southwestern landscape and Native Americans figure prominently in this novel. The American Southwest, Mexico, and their indigenous cultures occupied Cather's interest as she participated in the quest to discover a "genuine culture," and she found it in the Native American communities, living and dead, who appear in three of the four novels discussed here.

The American Southwest also provided important subjects, including both land and people, who Gilpin photographed. Cather was well acquainted with photography and the photographers of Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession movement, which included her friend and photographer, Alice Boughton, another female photographer mentored by Gertrude Käsebier. Boughton nearly brought Cather and Gilpin together for a collaborative project suggested by Gilpin, particularly as Gilpin's landscape photography was directly influenced by the literary landscapes in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *The Professor's House*, where the entire middle section of the novel is devoted to a character who photographs the remains and artifacts of a vanished Southwestern indigenous group. In spite of the fact that Gilpin was one of the first female landscape photographers in a genre of photography dominated by men, she never articulated a specific gendered aesthetic in her written work, as Käsebier did, and she wouldn't express any thoughts on women's rights or women as artists until much later in her life. However, after reading Cather's *The Professor's House*, she felt her own photos of the

Southwest would better illustrate the landscape in the novel than the fictional photos produced by but never described by the male character, Tom Outland. To that end, Gilpin proposed a collaboration between herself and Cather where her photos would accompany a special edition of *The Professor's House*, but the project never materialized. However, unlike the character Tom Outland, Gilpin was in a unique position to photograph living Native Americans. Inspired by Käsebier's gendered aesthetic, she formed connections with her Southwestern Native American subjects and eventually produced several collections of images, including one book whose title resists Curtis's depiction of Native Americans as vanishing: *The Enduring Navaho*. In spite of the unrealized collaboration between Cather and Gilpin, the effort illustrates the profound influences between two women who captured western landscapes and women of the soil in photographs and on the page.

In addition, both Cather and Gilpin understood photography's unique ability to construct both identity and history. In both *My Ántonia* and *The Professor's House*, Cather makes important use of photographic language and descriptions of fictional photographs as pivotal, identity-creating elements in her narratives. In *The Song of the Lark*, she explores how the landscape provides a means to construct identity as an artist, particularly by allowing her character to claim agency through her connection to an ancient, indigenous women's history. This, too, is a theme Gilpin explores in her photography, claiming agency through photographing non-white subjects such as the Navaho, as well as members of other Southwestern Native American cultures.

At the same time, Cather also understood how to use the photographic portrait to create and to promote her own identity as a writer. Her portrait was taken by many

photographers, including Edward Steichen, one of the major members of the Photo-Secession. Further, the Cather family archives house many photographs of friends and relatives, including a portrait of Annie Sadilek Pavelka, a friend of the Cather family who became the inspiration for the character *Ántonia* Shimerda in *My Ántonia*. Unlike Faulkner, Cather uses photographs, as well as *Ántonia*'s aforementioned photograph album, as a means to construct identity and history in the life of this fictional character, a character living in the margins of civilization on the Nebraska frontier. *Ántonia* is also an "other" because she is a Bohemian immigrant from what is now known as the western region of the Czech Republic, who is now living on the western, prairie fringe of American civilization. Her photographs prevent her from being erased by history and they refute a version of her history that was constructed by the observations and the memories of male characters like the narrator, Jim Burden, who represents the dominant, white male culture.

In the third chapter, I focus on writer Katherine Anne Porter and photographer Tina Modotti. In the early 1920s, Porter, who grew up on the southern border between Texas and Mexico, joined a small, tightly-knit art community of writers and artists in the 1920s in post-revolutionary Mexico that included well-known painters Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, as well as photographers Tina Modotti, Edward Weston. Porter planned to begin her career as a writer working for an American magazine in Mexico. Modotti was an Italian immigrant whose family moved to the U.S. in 1913 and ultimately settled in San Francisco. Eventually, Modotti moved to Los Angeles to pursue an acting career in film, which is where she met photographer Edward Weston, who would become her mentor and lover. In 1923, she moved to Mexico with Weston. While in Mexico, Modotti

moved from being an exotic, often nude subject in front of the camera as Weston's model as well as his assistant, to being behind the camera, creating her own evocative photographs, both documentary and artistic, that would establish her as an artist. Modotti's photographic images and Porter's textual portraits worked much like London's human documents, making visible the indigenous and working-class people living in the margins of post-revolutionary Mexico. Porter, an unknown writer at the time, seized the opportunity to establish herself as an artist through her fiction, incorporating a gendered, photographic aesthetic and imagery into narratives such as "María Concepción" and "Hacienda." In these short stories, as well as in her essays, "The Fiesta of Guadalupe" and "Xochimilco," Porter claims agency through indigenous Mexicans by presenting them as dignified, strong members of an idealized "genuine culture." Mexico looked to its indigenous communities in the wake of the revolution in order to redefine Mexican culture in much the same way Americans, like Cather and Gilpin, looked to the indigenous cultures of the American Southwest. On the other hand, some critics maintain that some of Porter's treatment of indigenous Mexican culture adopted the tone of a white, American imperial colonizer (Kraver). Porter does apply some romantic language in her stories, as for example "María Concepción," but she also captures the beauty, dignity, and hardships of indigenous and working-class Mexican life, as did the work of Modotti. Both artists utilized a definitive eyemindedness, a gendered photographic aesthetic that not only played a role in the development of Mexico's cultural renaissance, it also helped them define themselves as artists.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, I will examine a collaborative project, one of the first of its kind, between a woman photographer and woman writer. Appearing in 1933,

*Roll Jordan, Roll* featured the photographs of Doris Ulmann and the text of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Julia Peterkin (who claimed Willa Cather was one of her favorite authors). This pioneering project focused on creating a record of the lives of rural African Americans in the Deep South, including the Gullah community (endnote 10) in South Carolina. While this collaborative project never became as successful as similar collaborations that followed, their work preceded more well-known projects like James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Peterkin had an intimate connection with the Gullah community, and that community is the subject of the bulk of her work in short story collections and in novels, including the novel that won the Pulitzer in 1929, *Scarlet Sister Mary*. Unfortunately, few people know that she was the first Southern woman to win a Pulitzer, long before Katherine Anne Porter received hers. However, as the white mistress of a plantation where the ancestors of the Gullahs once lived as slaves, it is obvious that issues of race and class are paramount in the consideration of Peterkin's work and requires an examination of how those issues are tracked throughout her collaboration with Ulmann. While some scholars have accused Peterkin of taking a patronizing, paternalistic tone in describing the African-American community in the text of *Roll Jordan Roll*, her novel *Scarlet Sister Mary* drew praise from Harlem Renaissance notables such as W.E.B. DuBois and James Weldon Johnson for its seminal portrayals of strong, complex African American female characters. Peterkin claimed agency through the portrayal of the African American Gullah that shared her land and living, and she placed an African American Gullah woman at the center of her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, giving the protagonist, Mary, a unique, strong voice like Porter's María Concepción, although Peterkin lets Mary speak in her own

voice, her own dialect. Given Peterkin's literary popularity in the 1920s, her biographer, Susan Millar Williams, suggests that writer Zora Neale Hurston may have been influenced by her work: "The heroines of *Scarlet Sister Mary* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are strong, sexy, free spirits who live as they please and thumb their noses at convention" (291). Peterkin herself aspired to be a free spirit like her characters, but she found herself alternating between a longing for freedom from established Southern gender norms and lapsing into her position as a member of the Southern, white plantation class. And in spite of her success with *Scarlet Sister Mary*, it often seems it is with the plantation owner's voice that she describes, with a troubling, romanticizing nostalgia, the lives of the African-American individuals in *Roll Jordan Roll*. Much like Porter was accused of assuming a colonizer's tone toward indigenous Mexicans, Peterkin's paternalistic text, while not applying a gendered photographic aesthetic like the other writers discussed here, can be read differently because of its juxtaposition with the starkly beautiful, evocative photographic images produced by Ulmann. That juxtaposition lends Peterkin's text a kind of agency that suggests a different interpretation of her text; the presence of Ulmann's photographs creates a space wherein Peterkin seems to indirectly indict her own Southern, white plantation class on issues of race, which Peterkin avoided in her other work.

Doris Ulmann was already an established, successful portrait photographer in New York when she met Peterkin. Although it's unknown exactly when they met, Williams describes a party in 1929 that Ulmann threw on behalf of Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco, a member of Mexico's post-revolution art community with Porter, Diego Rivera and Tina Modotti. Peterkin attended this party, so it's clear she was



included in Ulmann's social circle. Peterkin and Ulmann became friends around the time Ulmann traveled to Peterkin's plantation, Lang Syne, in South Carolina to photograph the lives of rural African Americans and the Gullah culture. Moving beyond her successful career as a portrait photographer (like Käsebier, Gilpin, and Modotti), Ulmann chose to photograph subjects not traditionally depicted by the Pictorialists with whom she trained as a photographer (as did Gilpin). Her interest in cultures threatened with vanishing in an industrialized nation prompted her to seek out not "genuine cultures" as did Gilpin or Modotti, but groups of pre-industrial cultures like those living in Appalachia and the African American rural cultures of the South. She was determined to create a visual record of their lives that wasn't produced for a prurient public's consumption as other photographs of Native Americans were. Though there's no direct line from Gertrude Käsebier to Ulmann (although Ulmann attended the Clarence White School, where Käsebier gave an occasional lecture), she shared Gertrude Käsebier's, Laura Gilpin's and Tina Modotti's gendered photographic aesthetic, capturing the unique essence of her non-white, non-traditional subjects in front of the camera that could only be accomplished with an exchange of gazes between the photographer and the subject. And, as did Käsebier in her portraits of Native Americans, Ulmann encouraged her subjects to appear as they wished, free from being artificially positioned or adorned. Photographing the Gullah proved to be a greater challenge, however, as they were more reticent subjects resistant to being photographed, complicating the exchange of gazes. Nevertheless, Ulmann captured the tension of defiance along with the dignified beauty of these people, whose faces contain stories of their own—darker stories far less nostalgic than Peterkin describes in *Roll Jordan Roll*. In the end, in spite of the troubling complications of race,

Ulmann and Peterkin produced a remarkable collaboration that warrants a close reading and must be considered within the historical context in which it was produced.

The connections between the photographers and writers discussed here reach across geographic and cultural borders, and this study highlights the importance of the gendered photographic aesthetic as it is applied in their work, which is situated within those webs of connection. Focusing on these writers and photographers, I show how gender and other differences influence cultural production, how they inform the writers' and photographers' ethics of seeing, how these artists and writers employed a visual language to create or preserve identities and histories, and how that visual language developed as part of a transcultural exchange within a web of connections between themselves and their non-white subjects. In doing so, this study ultimately aims to help restore "the missing histories of women's and other contributions" in the canon of artistic and cultural practices (Pollock xxii). My study also addresses gender difference "as a complex structuration of subjectivity and social relations in perpetual play with other determining and over-determining relations of power and formations of subjectivity" (xxi) along with its relationship to race, power, and the privileging of cultural production. Ultimately, the real violence, as opposed to Wexler's domestic, imperialistic violence of the "innocent eye" of white women photographers, is in the impulse to "banish feminist interventions [in art history] to the dustbin of history and proclaim a post-feminist age" (Pollock xxii) because that denies the ongoing need to challenge our notion of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe, particularly when one acknowledges the innovative, groundbreaking nature of their work. A consideration of the collaborative influences within the web of connections among these women

photographers and writers at the turn of the last century re-engages that ethics of seeing and thereby increases our perception of the richness of cultural history at these particular intersections of photographic and literary history. They produced, out of necessity, a new way of seeing, which continues to influence contemporary women writers and artists, and they compel us to see and consider their work in a new light.

## Chapter 1

### A Studio of One's Own: Gertrude Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá

Gertrude Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá are two important figures in photography and literary history who remain relatively unknown and understudied. There is only one biography of Gertrude Käsebier by Barbara Michaels. Biographical information can be found about Zitkála-Šá in the introductions to various volumes of her work (Cathy N. Davidson and Ada Norris, P. Jane Hafen), but there is no scholarly biography of Zitkála-Šá, one of the first Native American women writers. Doreen Rappaport created a tapestry of information about her drawn from Zitkála-Šá's own writing when Rappaport produced *The Flight of Red Bird, The Life of Zitkála-Šá*, written for young adults. Even less is written about the collaboration between Gertrude Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá with regard to Käsebier's portraits of Zitkála-Šá and Käsebier's possible influence on Zitkála-Šá's writing (Michaels, Hutchinson, Davidov), which remains one of the first collaborations between an early twentieth-century woman photographer and a woman writer, although they didn't produce a project together like the one created by Ulmann and Peterkin. Nevertheless, their personal connection enabled a collaboration that had, at its core, a gendered photographic aesthetic, an aesthetic that addresses issues of gender and race by presenting a visual grammar that establishes an ethics of seeing whereby artists determine for themselves what is worth presenting in both photographic images and in text. This aesthetic is also marked by a transcultural reciprocity of vision operating within their connection. At the core of Käsebier's aesthetic is her commitment to make portraits that revealed the souls of real people, including indigenous people, which dovetailed with Zitkála-Šá's desire to represent her real identity as an educated, musically proficient,

mixed-blood Native American woman, and in so doing, she indicts the racial biases of the dominant white culture. They accomplished this by creating a visual grammar that involved Zitkála-Šá's decision to pose with both Native-American and European props. On the page, Zitkála-Šá created detailed textual portraits, though her use of photographic language is limited. As a result, Käsebier's studio became a contact zone where a transcultural exchange between artists produced a photographic collaboration through an exchange of gazes atypical in most Native American portraiture at that time.

When Gertrude Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá decided to collaborate on several photographic portraits of Zitkála-Šá in 1898, it was at a time when both women were moving out of their respective private, domestic spheres and establishing their identities as artists. Käsebier, an upper middle-class wife and mother, was beginning to receive acclaim for her portrait photography, while Zitkála-Šá, a young, unknown Indian teacher in an Indian school, was about to become one of the first recognized Native American female authors. Women, in general, were moving out of the private, domestic sphere and into the public sphere, which, as art historian Kathleen Pyne states, was "a world previously reserved for men" (21). This meant that more women had opportunities to earn their own living by working outside the home in occupations previously dominated by men. The practice of photography was one occupation that enabled them to do that. However, while photography was considered a medium suitable for female sensibilities, most middle-to-upper-class white women were encouraged to practice photography not as a profession, but as a hobby. Käsebier, who received formal art training when she studied painting at the Pratt Institute in the early 1890s before pursuing photography, encouraged other women to study photography, though not simply as a hobby, but as a

profession. In a lecture Käsebier gave at the Photographic Society of Philadelphia in 1898 and reproduced in the June, 1898 issue of *The Photographic Times*, she told her audience “I earnestly advise women of artistic tastes to train for the unworked field of modern photography. It seems to be especially adapted to them, and the few who have entered it are meeting with gratifying and profitable success” (quoted in Michaels 28). Not only did she encourage women to train as photographers, she encouraged them to use the field as a means for economic gain. Käsebier, herself, defied societal, gender expectations that placed limits on women’s photography by establishing her own portrait studio in a room “on an upper floor of the Women’s Exchange” off Fifth Avenue in New York. The Exchange was a place that “helped ‘gentlewomen’ who were obliged to support themselves by selling their handicrafts” (28). Käsebier’s motivation for opening a studio was also personal, driven initially by the need to find a way to support her family after her husband Edward became gravely ill. (Edward eventually recovered, but Käsebier chose to continue her work.) Although Käsebier wasn’t an actual part of the Exchange, Michaels asserts that “she benefited from “the congenial atmosphere among women artists in its studios.” This congenial environment was necessary for women artists according to another woman photographer. Mary Carnell, responding to the question of why it was necessary to have a separate exhibition of women’s photographic work, explained in her article appearing in 1910 in *Wilson’s Photographic Magazine*, “Women are too new at the business game; they have not even yet been so many years freed from the frying pan, the needle, and the blackboard—those three time-honored and eminently respectable fields of feminine endeavor. We are women of a different day; we have much to learn, and we must learn it together” (reprinted in *Camera Fiends & Kodak Girls* 193,

194). In writing this, Carnell articulates the importance of a web of connection among women artists. Käsebier had the support of other women artists, as well as the support of some prominent male photographers like Alfred Stieglitz and Clarence White. With that support, she became one of the first successful female commercial photographers and one of the founding members of the Photo-Secession, a group that promoted photography as art.

In the beginning of her photography career, most of Käsebier's subjects seemed to reflect her world in the traditional domestic sphere of the dominant white, upper-middle-class. However, while most of her portraits seem to give, as Pyne claims, "definitive shape to the world of mothers and children," Pyne also points out that those images are deceptive because they "could not encompass the entire domain of bourgeois Anglo-American women, for that world was changing rapidly" (2). Though Käsebier initially embraced marriage and motherhood, she also defied traditional gender expectations because "she shared the new woman's aspirations to higher education, professional competence, economic autonomy, and social reforms" (17). In the era of the New Woman, women were beginning to see and represent themselves beyond the male gaze in both photograph and print. Situated within this particular moment in history, Susana Costa points out that Käsebier became one of the first women photographers to generate a new way of seeing the "intimate mother-child relationship as a [photographic] performance, noticeable in photographs such as *Adoration*" (fig. 1) as well as *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* (fig. 11). Plus, a closer examination of her Indian portraits and of photographs like *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* reveals some of Käsebier's

unconventional or what she referred to as “heretical views” (quoted in Michaels 28), not just about marriage and motherhood and on what professions were suitable for women.

Zitkála-Šá, too, generated a new way of seeing while situated in this same moment in history when Native Americans were beginning to advocate for their rights to be seen and treated as human beings from within the margins of the dominant, white society. Zitkála-Šá accomplished this not only through the photographic portraits on which she collaborated with Käsebier, she also accomplished this in the way she presented textual images of the domestic sphere and motherhood. Her textual images challenged the white, dominant culture’s stereotypes of Native Americans because her images were not considered traditional by the dominant white culture; they were images of strong, Native American women and mothers. Just as Käsebier’s portraits “could not encompass the entire domain of bourgeois Anglo-American women,” the textual portraits of Zitkála-Šá’s Native American female characters challenge the racial biases in her white readers who either sexualized Native American women or viewed them as beasts of burden. Further, Zitkála-Šá’s comparison of Native American virtues with the abusive behavior of white characters in her narratives served to indict the dominant culture who envisioned themselves as saviors of the “savage,” Indian race.

If rapid change marked the world of Anglo-American women, it dramatically marked an increasingly marginalized Native American culture. Zitkála-Šá’s biographer, Doreen Rappaport, explains that with the passing of the Dawes Act in 1887, Indian lands were reduced from 138 million acres to 47 million acres, helping to break up whole nations (77). In addition, Native American children were sent, sometimes forcibly, to Indian schools where they were stripped of their native culture and made to assimilate



into the dominant white culture (25). After graduating from such a school (White's Manual Labor Institute), Zitkála-Šá (then Gertrude Simmons) entered Earlham College in Indiana, but she left in 1897 because of poor health. After attending Earlham, she became a teacher at the Carlyle Indian School. Her experiences during these periods of her life became the flash point that prompted her to write the stories and essays that were then published in prominent magazines like *Harper's*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Everybody's Magazine*, magazines that also published Käsebier's images. These stories were published under a Sioux name she chose for herself, Zitkála-Šá, which means "Red Bird," an apt name for a mixed-race individual, a red-skinned woman who negotiated the in-between space separating Native American culture and white culture. As Zitkála-Šá, she left teaching in 1899 and became a classically trained musician after attending the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, and she became one of the first notable Native American writers published in periodicals with a mainly white readership, although later in life, she stopped writing and became a passionate advocate for Native American rights.

At the time Zitkála-Šá and Gertrude Käsebier collaborated on Zitkála-Šá's portraits, Zitkála-Šá was in the process of writing down some familiar Indian legends, and soon after, she would write the autobiographical stories about her childhood and school years, which would include textual images of strong Native American women and mothers, not unlike those depicted in Käsebier's photographs. Zitkála-Šá's textual portraits, though, were meant to indict the dominant culture's perception and definition of Indian motherhood as downtrodden or savage by presenting strong, female characters who demonstrate the same selfless qualities as those depicted in Käsebier's photographic

portraits of white mothers. Further, Zitkála-Šá, too, waded through a “sea of criticism” in response to her essay, “Why I Am A Pagan” that appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1900 because in it, she rejects Christianity in favor of her native, nature-based beliefs. In this way, both photographer and writer used the margins of dominant white male culture as transcultural space, a space that theorist Homi Bhabha claims can “provide...the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood...that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration” (2). For Käsebier, that space was her studio. There, she and Zitkála-Šá would employ her gendered, photographic aesthetic to create the portraits representative of Zitkála-Šá’s racial and cultural hybridity, a hybrid identity that Zitkála-Šá would present in the autobiographical stories and essays, which would eventually be collected into her book *American Indian Stories* in 1921.

There is no documentation regarding how Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá met in 1898. Hutchinson states that Käsebier was a supporter of the Carlisle Indian School where Zitkála-Šá was a teacher (*Indian Craze* 161) and they may have met there. Alternatively, Zitkála-Šá may have been visiting friends who were part of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show. Michaels notes that to Käsebier, Zitkála-Šá wasn’t merely a photographic subject, she considered her a friend (42). In the summer of 1898, Käsebier was photographing many of the Native Americans in that show in her New York studio, and scholar Ruth Spack claims she not only invited Zitkála-Šá to her studio, but she also invited Zitkála-Šá to stay in her home for several weeks during the time she sat for the portraits (213). This demonstrates a closer connection between Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá than is typical between a photographer and her subject. In addition to working on the portraits together, Michaels also states that Käsebier “transcribed and saved Zitkála-Šá’s tales of ‘How the

Indians Came on Earth,' and 'Why the Indians Have Red Stripes on Their Faces When Going to War'" (42). Clearly, this indicates Käsebier's interest and support of Zitkála-Šá's writing and suggests that she even encouraged Zitkála-Šá to write, similar to the way she encouraged other women to take up camera work. In 1899, when Zitkála-Šá went to Boston to study violin, Käsebier most likely introduced her to F. Holland Day, a prominent photographer (who also photographed Zitkála-Šá), writer, and publisher in Boston who, as Michaels claims, may also have encouraged her to write the autobiographical stories that would be published in the *Atlantic Monthly* (42).

It was a pivotal time for both artists. Käsebier, who initially pursued commercial photography as a means to support her family when her husband became ill, was already a successful portrait photographer, and had been included in the prestigious Philadelphia Photographic Salon later in 1898, the first exhibition in the United States modeled on European art exhibitions that celebrated photography as a legitimate art form. What made this event pivotal for Käsebier was not only that ten of her photos had been chosen, but that it granted her work the kind of exposure that resulted in her inclusion in Stieglitz's Photo-Secession group, legitimizing her role as a photographer and artist. On the other hand, her work also met with strong resistance within the photography community from those who refused to acknowledge her as an artist or a professional. In an article originally published in 1904, in the British periodical *Photography*, Joseph T. Keiley, another artist who photographed Zitkála-Šá, would later recount how Käsebier "was subjected to considerable abuse and ridicule, both in certain professional publications, and even in speeches at the conventions" (from his article reproduced in *Camera Fiends & Kodak Girls* 166, 167). Ironically, he would later add to that ridicule. Some of the

ridicule was based on her unconventional methods of producing portraits, even though the subject matter included seemingly conventional images of women and children like *Adoration*, and *Portrait of a Boy*, images that pre-date her portraits of Zitkála-Šá. Although she was considered a Pictorialist<sup>2</sup> photographer, she eschewed some Pictorialist approaches to portraiture, which involved props and elaborate backgrounds, in favor of a making use of a simple background and applying a soft focus, as seen in these two



Fig. 1 *Adoration*, Gertrude Käsebier, 1897  
International Museum of Photography at  
George Eastman House, Rochester, N.Y.



Fig. 2 *Portrait of a Boy*, Gertrude Käsebier, 1897  
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

images. Sometimes light would illuminate the sitter's face or hands, the subject lit dramatically against an often velvety, dark background, which some likened to portraits created by painters like Rembrandt. Beyond the framing of the subject, it was Käsebier's ultimate intent, as she claimed in Edgerton's article in *The Craft* magazine, "to bring out in each photograph the essential personality that is variously called temperament, soul,

humanity” (173). In order for her to accomplish this, Käsebier needed to connect with her subjects on a personal level. Edgerton goes on to say that for Käsebier, “Every man and woman, old or young, who comes to [her], becomes for the time a part of her life” (177), as did Zitkála-Šá when she and Käsebier collaborated on her portraits, a collaboration that included an exchange between the photographer and her subject that extended beyond the portraits themselves.

Käsebier’s portraits, no matter who they depicted, were intimate exchanges between the photographer and her subjects, including her marginalized subjects. Käsebier’s portraits of Native Americans demonstrate her use of a gendered aesthetic by presenting an opportunity for those she photographed to collaborate with her regarding how they were depicted. At the same time, photographer Edward Curtis was beginning his ambitious project of photographing Native Americans, documenting the vanishing of American Indian culture as he posed his subjects in various costumes, often having them perform preexisting models of Indian-ness by having them stare straight into the camera lens with stony, stoic expressions. Käsebier shared his interest in photographing Native Americans, but unlike Curtis and other male photographers who traveled throughout the West to photograph their subjects, Käsebier invited the Native Americans performing in Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West Show* into her studio where she offered them refreshments. This is an important distinction from the work of Käsebier’s male counterparts as Elizabeth Hutchinson points out. Throughout her article published in *American Art* in 2002, Hutchinson discusses these distinctions, distinctions that contribute to Käsebier’s gendered photographic aesthetic: (1) Käsebier emphasized the individual identities of her subjects and didn’t present their images as cultural objects to satisfy the demand for all

things Indian as part of the dominant culture's "Indian craze" (2) She presented her subjects as individuals living in a contemporary world, and thus, she didn't remove contemporary details like wristwatches—in one portrait of Joe Black Fox he holds a lit cigarette (3) Her subjects were being photographed in a woman's studio, where the gaze is reversed with a woman behind the camera, and finally (4) The images themselves were produced for a primarily female audience as they appeared in the popular family magazine, *Everybody's Magazine*, whose readership "included many middle-class women, who, like Käsebier, were longing to exercise their moral and economic power in the public sphere" (Hutchinson, "When the 'Sioux Chief's Party Calls'" 53). Shifting the gaze and the space in which the images are produced are fundamental elements of a gendered photographic aesthetic that created this new way of seeing, because Käsebier resituates the traditional space of cultural production by claiming a studio of her own, which ceases to serve a "mastering gaze." Instead, it "becomes the locus of relationships" (Pollock 124), a contact zone where she achieves her goal to engage the soul and humanity of her subjects.

Yet another difference between Käsebier and photographers like Curtis is that although they both photographed Native Americans, Hutchinson asserts that Käsebier expressed a "nostalgia for the Indian friends she had made during four childhood years spent near the boomtown of Golden, Colorado" (46). Her subjects were connected to a part of her personal history. Contrary to Käsebier's mother's sentiments recorded in an interview with photographer and critic Joseph T. Keiley, where her mother asserted her feeling that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian" (164), Michaels quotes Käsebier's granddaughter describing her grandmother's respect for Native Americans: "She felt they

were the only truly honest people she knew” (29), a sentiment not shared by the majority of white American culture. After opening her studio in the Exchange, she invited some Native American performers from Buffalo Bill’s *Wild West Show* to have tea with her there. She did this against the advice of friends whose warning against the invitation was colored by racist bias. Michaels recounts that Käsebier’s friends told her “if she opened her doors to them once, the Indians would always feel welcome and would return without warning” (30). Käsebier ignored the warning. As she developed relationships with her Native American subjects, it’s clear in many of the portraits she took of them that there was an exchange of gazes even though, as Michaels explains, Käsebier seemed to have two conflicting agendas for photographing the Native American troupe: “On one hand, as with other sitters, she wanted to capture individual personalities. On the other hand, she wanted to suggest an archetypal Indian” (30) as archetypal Indian images were more commercially viable. Michaels complicates the idea that a commercially driven motive informed Käsebier’s Indian portraits by saying “she did not care to cater to popular taste or preconceptions about Indians, as her Western contemporaries [such as Edward Curtis] did” (34). Nevertheless, in spite of a possible commercial motive for some of her Indian portraits, in the end, she treated her subjects with great respect, corresponding with many of them long after they sat for portraits.

Some of her Native American portraits, including one of Zitkála-Šá, were published in an article titled “Some Indian Portraits” in *Everybody’s Magazine* in 1901 and included drawings created by her subjects as well as excerpts from her subjects’ correspondence with her, reproducing letters by Samuel Lone Bear, with whom she continued a correspondence long after the portraits were taken. Often, Käsebier traded

gazes by sending her Native American subjects a photo of herself, as mentioned in the letter penned by Amos Two Bulls. However, the exchange of gazes between a woman photographer and her male subjects is clear in many of her portraits. In addition, a closer examination of Käsebier's visual grammar in these images within their historical context reveals even more levels of complexity between herself and her subjects.

Although Käsebier's portrait of Charging Thunder wasn't included in the article for *Everybody's Magazine*, it is a poignant example of the exchange of gazes inherent in Käsebier's gendered photographic aesthetic. In this image, Charging Thunder sits looking into the camera with a smile, seated next to and with one arm around his dog. This image subverts stereotypes of Native Americans in several ways. First, there are few portraits



Fig. 3 Portrait of Charging Thunder, Gertrude Käsebier, ca. 1900, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

of Native Americans smiling into a camera. At that time, many of them still clung to the belief that a photograph stole a part of their spirit, or with regard to photographing children, they believed “making a portrait of a child would kill it” (Michaels 36). Clearly, Charging Thunder is perfectly at ease in front of the camera and the photographer. Secondly, being photographed with his dog could be a wryly humorous, collaborative response to a short article appearing on page 2 of *The New York Times* on June 24, 1888



that stated the dogs of Staten Island were disappearing because the “refining influence of civilization has not lessened the strong taste that Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Indians have for dog flesh.” Deliberately constructing an unusual composition such as this further challenges the stereotype of the stoic, stone-faced savage by depicting an individual with a developed sense of humor. Considering this, it is possible the smile indicates a definite exchange in the form of a shared joke between the photographer and her subject, a smile perhaps meant to scandalize the likes of gullible *New York Times* readers. Both the smile and the dog constitute part of the visual grammar Käsebier employs to constitute her ethics of seeing, which is also meant to challenge the observer’s racial stereotypes of Native Americans.

A similar exchange of gazes is evident in Käsebier’s portrait of Joe Black Fox,



Fig. 4 Joe Black Fox, Gertrude Käsebier, ca.1898-1901,  
Division of Photographic History, National Museum  
of American History, Washington, D.C.

which was included in “Some Indian Portraits.” Here, too, her subject sits casually smoking a cigarette, looking intently into the camera with a suggestion of a smile while

wearing what appears to be a printed scarf. The cigarette and scarf locate him in the present even though he's wearing regalia that also indicates his Native American identity. Though his gaze lacks the outright humor evident in Charging Thunder's portrait, it also lacks the stoniness in many of Edward Curtis's portraits. His gaze is riveted almost "questioningly on the photographer. Käsebier photographed Joe Black Fox many times and featured several of his drawings in "Some Indian Portraits" alongside her photographs, which lent legitimacy to the cultural production of a marginalized member of non-white culture, particularly as he also signed his drawings. Signing his artwork indicated that he was educated, at least "educated enough to sign his name in script" (Michaels 36). Although, according to Michaels, not much is known about Joe Black Fox, the fact that Käsebier kept many of his drawings indicates a connection, an exchange between them. However, there may have been a more complex relationship between them when one considers one of his published drawings in historical context.

Joe Black Fox's drawing of two blanketed figures reproduced in "Some Indian Portraits" omits a bit of text on the drawing that reads "Mrs. Barstone." According to Michael Delaney's study, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Warriors*, the *New York Times* kept track of the activities of the Native American performers in the show and "referenced the friendships, and in one case elopement, of Indian performers and local white women" (63). The name "Mrs. Barstone" is written in Joe Black Fox's hand next to a figure drawn wrapped in a blanket alongside another darker, blanket-draped, possibly male figure above which Black Fox has written his own name. By including this drawing in "Some Indian Portraits," sans the name of Mrs. Barstone, Käsebier could have been acknowledging and also challenging the prejudice surrounding more intimate exchanges

between Native American men and white women. According to two articles printed in the *New York Times* in August of 1886, a member of Buffalo Bill's *Wild West Show* developed a romance and eventually eloped with a nineteen-year-old woman from Newark. This enraged Cody who was "under a contract with the Government to return Pushaluck [the Native American Performer], with the other Indians, to the reservation, in good order, at the expiration of the term" ("Pushaluck's Romance" 12), which emphasized their status not as free individuals but as indentured servants. This makes Käsebier's relationship with her Native American subjects even more remarkable not only for her ability to respect them as intelligent, creative, human individuals, but because she included visual cues that acknowledged those relationships in the portraits themselves.

Not all subjects, though, were at ease when being photographed. When one of her subjects, Chief Iron Tail, ripped up a photograph she had taken of him stripped of his regalia, it was because the feathers in the headdress she removed from him were not, as she thought, props as part of his performance. The author of the text of "Some Indian Portraits" (some speculate Käsebier herself wrote the text) explains the incident:

[T]he number of his plumes stood for enemies slain; they were like a Medal of Honor, or a Victoria Cross, or the Order of the Legion; and to be stripped of them before his comrades was as if a captain's sword should be broken in the face of his men. Without sentimental exaggeration, it was a tragedy to the veteran... Luckily, however, an explanation and a second sitting in full regalia entirely restored his peace of mind. (*Everybody's Magazine*)

In this case, Käsebier's impulse to remove his regalia, which was deeply connected to his sense of identity, was based on her desire to represent the "archetypal Indian," as an individual, without the trappings of what she considered "marks of a show Indian" (Michaels 33). Whatever her motives were for doing so, she failed in her original intention to allow her non-white subjects to determine how they wanted be portrayed and was complicit in forcing her subject to conform to a stereotype, "which judges the subject in terms of a preexisting model" (Burrows 156). After Iron Tail's volatile response, she re-shot his portrait with him seated in profile against a dark background, with light emphasizing the magnificence of the headdress. Even in profile, Chief Iron Tail appears to have a satisfied expression on his face reflecting that restored peace of mind, compared to the look of distress he wears in his stripped-down portrait. Käsebier respected him enough to honor his decision to be photographed as he wanted to appear, not just as the photographer wanted to present him.



Fig. 5 Iron Tail, Gertrude Käsebier, 1898, Division of Photographic History, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

Fig. 6 Profile of Iron Tail with headdress, Gertrude Käsebier, 1898, Division of Photographic History, National Museum of American History, Washington, D.C.

Although the language in the text accompanying the Indian portraits, which refers to Indians as "wild" or "naive," seems to reflect the stereotypical white attitude about

Native Americans, an attitude Käsebier might have anticipated in the *Everybody's Magazine* readership, the text also includes language to indicate that these images also represent individuals of strength, dignity, creativity, and bravery (as in her reference to Iron Tail as a war veteran as opposed to a savage. This problematizes Wexler's view that while Käsebier's photography "constituted a 'contact zone' between the always already domestic white woman and the soon-to-be domesticated, nonwhite Other," Käsebier fails to engender a wider "cross-racial empathy" in her photographs because she could have "risen to the occasion" to form a political affinity with the Other, but instead, her images were left to interpretation "according to the wishes of the strongmen of empire" (208). While Käsebier never mentions Zitkála-Šá in this article, published several years after Zitkála-Šá sat for her, the inclusion of her portrait in this collection for *Everybody's Magazine* is significant, not only because she's the only Native American woman represented in this collection of portraits, but also because Zitkála-Šá was, by that time, a recognized, accomplished musician and writer who had published autobiographical essays the year before in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Zitkála-Šá would also publish her story "The Warrior's Daughter" in *Everybody's Magazine* in 1902 and would eventually become an ardent political and cultural activist engaged in improving the lives of fellow Native Americans.

Käsebier photographed Zitkála-Šá using the same gendered photographic aesthetic she employed to create the portraits of the *Wild West Show* performers. With regard to Käsebier's Indian portraits, Native American author Rayna Green echoes some of Wexler's view when she states that while she doesn't want to "make too much of Käsebier's failures to live up to the nigh-irresistible romance of the End of the Trail

School of Photography, E. Curtis Prop,” she admits that Käsebier’s Indian images “are anything but the pictorial laments for eminent Indian extinction so tediously familiar from most of her peers.” Green then goes on to assert that Käsebier’s work is “best embodied in the Zitkala-Sa/Bonnin portraits...pictures of complex character, just the sort she said she wanted to make” (60). Käsebier’s portraits of Zitkála-Šá were created in Käsebier’s studio at around the same time she photographed the Wild West performers, and as Green points out, these portraits are more complex, layered with symbolism and subtext.

Up until the time Zitkála-Šá sat for her portraits, images of Native American women were heavily colored by cultural bias. Women, in general, were already assigned a subservient, passive, marginalized position in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American culture, but Native American women were even more marginalized. In her study of the history of Plains Indian women, Patricia Albers states that early accounts of encounters with Native Americans rarely included the activities of Native American women: “Plains Indian women are rarely visible as individuals” and “[s]ome early writers went as far as portraying Plains Indian women as chattel, enslaved as beasts of burden and beaten into submission by overbearing male masters” (3). This contradicts and/or ignores the fact that unlike dominant, patriarchal white culture, many Native American traditions were gynocentric and more than several nations were matriarchal. Zitkála-Šá encountered such a derogatory depiction of Indian women directly as a college student while competing in a statewide, collegiate oratory contest, which she won. She describes this image in “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” where she recounts the atmosphere during the contest and admits there was “a strong prejudice against my people”

(*American Indian Stories, Legends, and Other Writings* 102). During the course of the event, “some college rowdies threw out a large white flag, with a drawing of a most forlorn Indian girl on it. Under this they had printed in bold black letters words that ridiculed the college which was represented by a ‘squaw’” (103). Clearly, her intent in creating textual images of strong Native American women as well as in collaborating on portraits of herself as an accomplished, complex individual who is both white and Indian serve to counter the negative, stereotypical beliefs about Native American women within the dominant culture, like the one displayed on that white flag. The portraits on which she and Käsebier collaborated are composed with a visual grammar that present many different aspects of Zitkála-Šá as an individual woman, artist, and performer, just as her textual portraits of Native American women incorporate some of that visual grammar to reveal similar complexities.

One of the most visually striking images of Zitkála-Šá, dramatic in its bold tones and lighting, shows her standing in profile, a hand up as if to shade her eyes as she looks off into the distance. This particular image is a similar version of the one published in the article in *Everybody's Magazine* titled “Red Bird,” which is the English translation of the Sioux name, Zitkála-Šá, with which Gertrude Simmons would eventually rechristen herself. The traditional Native American costume she wears in both portraits is the same, and both subjects are in profile, but in the magazine image, Zitkála-Šá is seated with her arms at her side. Zitkála-Šá's stance in the portrait pictured here, as Rayna Green points out, provides an indication of Zitkála-Šá's own awareness of Indian-ness as performativity in the way that Käsebier treated the mother and child relationship as performativity. Although Zitkála-Šá didn't perform in the Wild West Show, roughly two

years after this portrait was taken she performed a violin solo as well as a recitation of a scene from Longfellow's poem "Hiawatha" for President William McKinley at the White House while she was studying music at the Conservatory of Music in Boston (Hafen 125). Much later, she would collaborate on composing an opera called "The Sundance Opera," which performed a version of the Sundance, a ritual considered sacred in Sioux culture. On one hand, while the recitation of "Hiawatha" could be seen as reinforcing the stereotypical images of Native Americans, her violin performances established her as a talented, classically trained musician. In addition, she had already established her reputation as an award-winning orator in college competitions, and as a writer when her autobiographical stories appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in January of that year. At the time this portrait was taken, Gertrude Simmons was not yet Zitkála-Šá, but she was beginning to forge an identity as a Native American writer insofar as her stories had



Fig. 7 Zitkála-Šá, Gertrude Käsebier, 1898, Division of Photographic History, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

already appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in January of that year. At the time this portrait was taken, Gertrude Simmons was not yet Zitkála-Šá, but she was beginning to forge this



identity, as seen in Käsebier's portraits of her. Therefore, an image depicting her in traditional Native American attire, with her long hair cascading down the length of her figure provides a deeper level of meaning when considered within the context of the autobiographical stories she would soon write and publish.

One of Zitkála-Šá's first pieces to appear in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The School Days of an Indian Girl*, included a chapter titled "The Cutting of My Long Hair," in which she provides an emotional description of her forced assimilation into the dominant culture. Zitkála-Šá's long hair is presented first in *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, published before *School Days* in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Recounting the story of her upbringing as a young girl living within Yankton Sioux culture, her hair is symbolic of her strength and freedom, as she describes herself running with her "long black hair blowing in the breeze...free as the wind that blew my hair" (*American Indian Stories* 68). However, soon after arriving in "the land of apples" (89) in *School Days*, she recounts the humiliation she felt when they cut her hair, a common practice when new Native American students first arrived at an Indian school. The motto of the founder of the Carlisle Indian School, where Zitkála-Šá would eventually teach, reflects a sense of justified violence in forcing Indian children to assimilate: "Kill the Indian to save the man" (Davidson, introduction to *American Indian Stories* xvii). Indian children were stripped of all Native American clothing, their long hair, and their language. Often, these things were done against a child's will, and as Zitkála-Šá claims, she was "carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair" (*American Indian Stories* 91) when she tried to resist. She explains her humiliation: "Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair

was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards” (90). Considering that many white young women wore their hair long, cutting the hair of Indian children was a deliberate act of oppression, which Zitkála-Šá likens to the sheering of sheep, declaring at the conclusion of this chapter, “I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder” (91). As an adult Native American woman, this portrait shows that she has reclaimed her hair and traditional Indian dress as part of her Native American identity. Her hair is once again long, and in this composition, it is waist-length and unbraided, creating two strong, flowing vertical lines that frame her. While some like Rayna Green claim she stands with her “hand to head, looking afar in the clichéd Indian pose” (58), Michaels supposes that this gesture may indicate a longing for her childhood home in South Dakota, as both she and Käsebier have western childhoods in common (43). Regardless, while Zitkála-Šá may have been well aware of the performativity of her Indian-ness in such a pose, it also appears that with her hair cascading down either side of her, she is observing the world from within the frame of her Indian-ness. This is similar to the way she artfully frames the autobiographical stories that challenge non-Indian readers to see her experiences from her perspective and not from white racial biases. She chose to appear with her hair once again long and unfettered, her hair an important element of her own visual grammar as it symbolizes her reclaimed identity, much as Iron Tail’s headdress was an important part of his identity.

Indeed, all of her portraits include some version of her with long hair, even if it is tied back in some way. Further, in the majority of her portraits, she wears Euro-American dresses although the objects she holds varies, including a Native American basket, a book, or her violin, each item representing a different aspect of her complex, hybrid

identity as both white and Indian. As Michaels explains, “Gertrude Käsebier’s portraits reflect the cultural duality that Zitkála-Šá reveals in her articles and letters” and that is also apparent in her two names—her Anglo name, Gertrude Simmons, and her chosen Sioux name, Zitkála-Šá (42). Although there’s no way of knowing which portraits were created first, there does seem to be a transition from the fully Native American portrait, to the portrait where Zitkála-Šá’s hair is adorned with beads while she holds an Indian basket to her chest. In the remaining portraits, there are no identifiable markings of Zitkála-Šá’s Native American identity. In the portrait of Zitkála-Šá holding a basket, her hair is tied back and adorned with beads, an indication of her Native American heritage, but unlike the ornate Indian dress she wore in a previous portrait, this dress is made of plain, white material, making a contrast between the printed background and drawing deliberate attention to the pattern of the basket she holds. Considering Zitkála-Šá’s deliberate choice of items as part of the visual grammar she uses to construct her identity, holding an Indian basket is not without its own symbolism.

On the surface, this basket appears to function as a marker, a Native American artifact, but baskets had significant uses in certain Plains Indian rituals. According to historian Mary Jane Schneider, an “important northern Plains ceremony that involved the use of baskets was the adoption ceremony” (124). Although she offers no specific details about adoption ceremonies in Zitkála-Šá’s Sioux tradition, the Yankton Sioux were also a northern, plains-dwelling nation and kinship in Sioux culture was an integral part of their social structure, whether through blood or adoption. Called the Hunkapi ceremony, it unites persons unrelated by blood in order to establish “kinship relationships with other Nations and divisions,” which serves “as a way to keep the peace between communities”



Fig. 8 Zitkála-Šá, Gertrude Käsebier, 1898, Division of Photographic History, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

(Crawford 92). Zitkála-Šá emphasized the importance of kinship in her early writing. In her piece, “Why I Am A Pagan,” which appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1902, she stated that “our tribe is one large family, where every person is related to all the others” (*American Indian Stories* 116), but then she expands the notion of kinship to say that “all are akin” and that “racial lines, which once were bitterly real, now serve nothing more than marking out a living mosaic of human beings” (116). Much later, in a piece she would publish in the *California Indian Herald* in 1924 titled “Heart To Heart Talk,” she would say that Indian “devotion to their families and even distant relatives is most remarkable” and that “[e]ither by blood, or by adoption every member of the tribe bore some relationship to the rest” (*American Indian Stories* 262). Within that context, the basket she holds in this portrait may symbolize the union of her white and Indian identities or it may have been intended to symbolize her own adoption into white, American culture. Adoption creates a bond considered more intimate than mere

assimilation, a bond that allows for a transcultural exchange, regardless of how contentious her relationship was with the dominant culture. On the other hand, Zitkála-Šá also includes a cautionary tale in her collection of stories, *Old Indian Legends*, which seems to address her own experience of the destructiveness of assimilation or adoption.

In her tale of “Iya, the Camp Eater,” Zitkála-Šá presents a scenario where a group of hunters finds a baby crying in the woods. They take the child to their camp and present it to the chief who determines his eldest daughter will adopt the child and raise it as her own. Some villagers caution that evil spirits sometimes arrive in a camp they mean to destroy in the guise of children. Nevertheless, the chief declares there will be a celebration in honor of the adoption. After the feast, when the village is quiet, the adoptive mother hears the sound of voices, a group of voices that seem to be drawing nearer to their own camp. As it turns out, the voices are coming from the adopted child and the chief determines that the child is actually Iya the camp-eater, a kind of demon that would have leapt out of the body of the child while all were sleeping and “swallow[ed] the whole tribe with one hideous gulp” (*American Indian Stories* 54). This legend could be interpreted as an allegory for what happened to the Native Americans at the hands of dominant, white culture. While some tribes welcomed early white settlers into their villages, Zitkála-Šá witnessed white culture slowly swallowing Native American land and culture. Lured by the voices of the missionaries into the land of red apples, Zitkála-Šá often likened her own experience of being swallowed by white culture as being entombed, “in my tomb, I was destitute” (112).

The remaining portraits feature Zitkála-Šá in flowing, traditional European dress (as opposed to Native American costume), holding a violin, with which she established



Fig. 9 Zitkála-Šá, Gertrude Käsebier, ca. 1898  
Division of Photographic History, National Museum  
of American History, Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, D.C.



Fig. 10 Zitkála-Šá, Gertrude Käsebier, 1898  
Division of Photographic History, National  
Museum of American History, Smithsonian  
Institution, Washington, D.C.

herself as a talented, classical musician (fig. 10). In another portrait, she holds a book in her lap (fig. 9), emphasizing her high level of education, perhaps and also her identity as a writer. Both the violin and the book are, again, part of the visual grammar that emphasizes Zitkála-Šá's mixed identity, but they also indicate her strengths as a creative, intelligent woman who has achieved, and who was about to achieve unprecedented success and receive recognition within the dominant culture. These portraits are similar to the kinds of images Käsebier produced of non-Native women, portraits she would continue to produce after her session photographing Zitkála-Šá, although many would feature middle- to upper-class white women, many of whom are depicted attending to children in various ways, whether they are holding them, guiding them, or reading to them. Here is where Zitkála-Šá and Käsebier's treatment of images of motherhood differ.

While Käsebier's images, on the surface, seem to reinforce and the dominant culture's exaltation of women's role as mothers, her gendered, photographic aesthetic also includes subtle indications in the images themselves that point to motherhood as

performativity<sup>2</sup>, suggesting motherhood was a performance that did not encapsulate the entirety of a woman's identity, certainly not of a woman who also defined herself as an artist. For Zitkála-Šá, not yet a mother at that time, performativity involved how she portrayed her Indian-ness, as well as how she also represented herself as a complex, educated woman of mixed blood. Nonetheless, she included textual images of strong women and mothers in *American Indian Stories*, which she used in ways to indict the dominant culture whose racial bias toward Native American women either sexualized them or imagined them as either savages or beasts of burden, denying Native American mothers the same exalted status as their white American counterparts.

For example, one of Käsebier's most famous images is called "Blessed Art Thou Among Women," a title that uses a phrase from the Bible that refers to the ultimate symbol of motherhood, the mother of Christ. In this image, a woman in a long, diaphanous gown stands next to a child in a doorway, as if guiding that child through the



Fig. 11 *Blessed Art Thou Among Women*, Gertrude Käsebier 1899, The Museum of Modern Art, N.Y.

doorway. Women being depicted in white, diaphanous gowns was part of a trend in art, a “poetics of whiteness” or a “feminized aesthetic” that Pyne suggests spiritualizes feminine sexuality through images of the archetypal mother figure (11). These images are present in the works of painters whose work influenced Käsebier and who were part of the Aesthetics and Arts and Crafts movements (Arthur Wesley Dow, James Whistler). This same “feminized aesthetic” also informed Pictorialism<sup>3</sup> in photography as photographers like Alfred Stieglitz strove to elevate photography as an art form akin to painting. As one of the founders of the Photo-Secession, Stieglitz believed that because Käsebier’s work was “a product of a woman’s experience...because it could not be divorced from her gendered and sexual identity,” and as such, her work embodied the Pictorialist aesthetic. By 1910, Stieglitz would disavow Pictorialism and Käsebier’s work in favor of “masculine modernist images” that leaned toward truth and reason, often featuring the female nude (16). While Stieglitz and others would eventually criticize Käsebier’s diaphanous images of women as symbols of feminine weakness, critics Joseph Keiley and Charles Caffin, who wrote articles and reviews for Stieglitz’s publication, *Camera Work*, initially championed her work, attributing the “naturalness of Käsebier’s portraits as somehow intrinsically related to her own feminine ability to make contact with the sitter’s essence” (32). Later, Keiley would equate that feminine ability with the “hysterical feminine vision that did not know its true self” (60), calling into question Käsebier’s competency as an artist. However, it was not only Käsebier’s ability to create a space wherein an exchange of gazes was possible, an ability that informed her gendered aesthetic, she also included a visual grammar that provided indications of women as reformers and as artists, as in the portrait called *The Sketch* depicting a woman holding a



sketchbook in front of her, “her figure uncorsetted, in the loose reform-style gown” (35) with her hair cascading over her shoulders, using hair as symbolic of spirit and freedom similar to the way Zitkála-Šá uses it, even including a Native American-style belt around her subject, which connects the subject to the Native American performers and artists she photographed previously. The same is true with *Blessed Art Thou Among Women*, an image often regarded as Käsebier’s celebration of ideal motherhood.

Käsebier, herself, admitted in the article by Giles Edgerton in *The Craft* magazine that although motherhood was important to her “from the first days of dawning individuality, I have longed unceasingly to make pictures of people” (reprinted in *Camera Fiends & Kodak Girls* 178). However, what many observers miss when looking at *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* is the presence of that longing. Even though the mother figure and child are almost oppressively framed by the strong, vertical lines of a threshold, and the mother figure bends slightly toward the child with her right arm around the child’s shoulder, her gaze is turned away from the child. Her body performs the nurturing motions of mothering, but her gaze is focused behind her, her head framed between two vertical sides of a painting or photograph hanging on the wall behind them. In addition, her left hand is raised and braced against the doorframe. Edgerton’s conventional interpretation of this image involves seeing the mother figure as guiding her daughter “forward into the future of her prescribed feminine role” with maternal affection “that is of renunciation and self-control” (178). However, when considering Käsebier’s own words in this article coupled with the mother figure’s posture and backward gaze, it suggests that, like Käsebier, this figure is poised to move beyond the accepted gender norms for women to step into the role of artist once the child crosses the symbolic

threshold. In this case, both posture and backward gaze toward the photograph or painting on the wall reveal the “unceasing” longing of the artist to return to her art. In fact, the maternal figure pictured in *Blessed Art Thou Among Women* wasn’t a studio model, she was an artist, poet Agnes Lee, whose first collection of poems *The Legend of a Thought* was published under the name Martha Agnes Rand in 1899, the same year Käsebier produced the photograph of her and her daughter. However, perhaps the “blessed” part is that as a middle-to-upper class, white matriarch, Käsebier had the luxury to define herself as a woman, a mother, and an artist, which she encouraged other women to do. That may have been true for some upper-class women photographers, like Ulmann (though Ulmann remained childless), but there was a period when Käsebier’s husband was diagnosed with what seemed like a terminal illness, which forced Käsebier into finding a way to support her family. Even as an artist, she remained committed to her maternal role of taking care of her family while maintaining a successful portrait studio.

Zitkála-Šá’s textual images of motherhood resonate with a similar poignancy to Käsebier’s photographs. Zitkála-Šá also presents her mother as a figure of selfless nurturing, but also as a figure who has endured not only longing, but the pain of great losses at the hands of the dominant white culture, the audience for whom Zitkála-Šá has written her stories. In the opening story of *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, her mother strikes a pose eerily reminiscent of the mother figure in “Blessed Art Thou Among Women.” Considering that Käsebier’s photo was created in 1899 when Zitkála-Šá was studying music at the Conservatory of Music in Boston, it is conceivable she may have seen it and allowed it to influence her portrayal of her mother, which would be eventually published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1900. While Käsebier’s image of

motherhood includes details that appear to question the limitations of gender roles for women, Zitkála-Šá uses her image to indict the dominant culture who celebrate white motherhood, but treat Native Americans, including mothers, with cruel heartlessness. In a scene that Zitkála-Šá describes where she and her mother are outdoors, there is a moment where Zitkála-Šá depicts her mother leaning toward her young daughter to wrap her right arm around her while her left hand is raised. That hand is not braced against a doorframe, but rather Zitkála-Šá explains that it “point[s] to the hill where my uncle and my only sister lay buried” (*American Indian Stories* 69). Similar to Käsebier’s maternal figure, this Native American mother figure’s stance is nurturing while also acknowledges profound loss. This mother is not blessed like the figure in Käsebier’s photograph, who is supposedly guiding her daughter toward “her future in her prescribed feminine role.” This Native American mother is directing her daughter’s gaze toward the graves of her relatives, into her people’s history that includes a past where Indian lands were stolen and where their people, many of them ill, were forced by the “heartless paleface” (70) to relocate to government land. As a result, Zitkála-Šá’s sister and uncle contracted illnesses on that march to government land and died soon after their arrival.

In spite of her hardships, Zitkála-Šá’s mother remained a strong woman and a strong influence in her life in spite of their differences, which were exacerbated by Zitkála-Šá’s assimilation into the dominant culture. She describes her mother’s acts of selflessness and generosity as a model of motherhood throughout *Impressions of an Indian Childhood*, depicting her mother treating the young Zitkála-Šá with patience, affection, and respect. Such behavior stands in sharp contrast to the treatment Zitkála-Šá received from the hands of her white caretakers in “The Land of Red Apples.” In addition

to being a model of motherhood, Zitkála-Šá also describes her mother as an artist who instructed the young Zitkála-Šá in the painstaking art of beadwork. In “Beadwork,” she describes her mother setting out piles of colored beads “just as an artist arranges the paints upon his palette” (75), teaching her daughter the principles of design and encouraging her to create her own designs, giving her an opportunity to express herself creatively. Later in life, she would channel that creativity into her writing

Beyond Zitkála-Šá’s descriptions of her mother as a model of motherhood, she also included depictions of strong women in other stories like “The Warrior’s Daughter.” Just as Käsebier served as a model of a strong woman navigating in and out of the margins of the private sphere, the character Tusee, is a model of womanhood that straddled the domestic spaces where “she sits within her tepee making beaded deerskins for her father” (134), and the public space of masculinity where she takes on the role of a warrior, reversing prescribed gender roles in the way that Käsebier flouted convention by obtaining her own public studio space and making a successful career as a professional portrait photographer. Tusee starts out as a female character in the traditional feminine role as the dutiful daughter, but when her lover is captured by an enemy warrior, she takes action. Using her intelligence to lure his captor into the darkness outside his village where she kills him, she then disguises herself as an old woman, returning to the now sleeping village to free her lover. He is weak from his ordeal and has difficulty standing, so she “lifts him upon her broad shoulders. With half-running, triumphant steps she carries him away into the open night” (140). Just as Käsebier shouldered the responsibility for supporting her family when her husband, weakened by illness, could no longer do that, Zitkála-Šá’s Tusee demonstrates her strength as a woman, declaring to the

enemy warrior she confronts and defeats, as well as to the white audience reading her story, “I am a Dakota woman!” (139).

Zitkála-Šá is that Dakota woman. Through her characters she establishes her own identity as a strong, Native American woman whose ability to draw readers into her stories, even when they contain a clear indictment of the racist stereotypes in her white, readership, marks her mastery in creating a new way of seeing Native Americans in her writing that generates a transcultural exchange. If, as Kenneth Lincoln claims in *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America*, “seeing is intercultural dialogue” (20), Zitkála-Šá’s stories can be read as examples of seeing that generates intercultural dialogue as she translates Native American culture to non-Native American readers, while at the same time positioning her readers in the dominant, white culture to see their own racist attitudes about Native Americans and to confront their cultural biases toward Native American women.

Finally, one of her most poignant intercultural dialogues occurs not in one of her stories, but in an essay provocatively titled “Why I Am A Pagan” (re-titled “The Great Spirit” in *American Indian Stories*) published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1902. Here, is where she combines photographic language and imagery to translate Native American culture for non-Native American readers while she also indicts both the dominant white, culture as well as Native Americans who have abandoned their spiritual heritage that whites consider the “folly of our old beliefs” to blindly embrace the “one God who gives reward or punishment to the race of dead men” (*American Indian Stories* 116) where the Christian dead “are gathered in unceasing song and prayer” and all the rest are consumed by hellfire. This hellfire, described to Zitkála-Šá by a male, Indian Christian convert, is

placed in sharp contrast to the “folly” of a belief in the benevolent Great Spirit she describes in the opening of the essay, a spirit who doesn’t divide and punish. Instead, “both great and small are so surely enfolded in His magnitude” (115), invoking the notion that the Native American Great Spirit displays more Christian attributes than the God espoused by the missionaries, whose deity of hellfire seems designed to extend imperial control over Native Americans, keeping them in line with the threat of “torturing flames” (116). During this encounter with the Indian convert who tries to convert her, Zitkála-Šá experiences photographic “lightning flashes” and “pictures” of her “own mother’s making” that are invoked when she remembers her own mother’s conversion to Christianity. For Zitkála-Šá, Christianity is “the new superstition” (116, 117). Zitkála-Šá brushes these lightning flashes away from her eyes “many like pictures” (117) the Indian convert invokes, warning her about the “after-doom of hell fire” (116). In a historical period where many Native Americans still believed that having a photograph taken of them could steal their spirit, Zitkála-Šá uses a gendered photographic aesthetic to suggest the true vehicle whereby the dominant culture steals Native Americans’ spirits and identities is not through a camera lens, it’s through this “new superstition.” She accomplishes this by specifically by reframing this subject and reversing the gaze, depicting a textual Indian portrait of her own, that of “the converted [male] Indian sitting wordless and with downcast face” (117). The converted Indian male is incapable of experiencing the final, highly visual, light-filled image she leaves for her readers, that of “spangles and oscillating brilliants of sun, moon, and stars” (117).

Zitkála-Šá responds to the threatening admonition of the converted Indian with kindness, offering to share her midday meal. This act has the effect of silencing him and

making him avert his eyes from hers. Zitkála-Šá used this encounter to demonstrate how the negative influence of white missionaries produced situations where there was no possibility of transcultural exchange, even among members of the same tribe, like the converted Indian male, whose conversion robs him of the capacity to accept Zitkála-Šá's hospitality. Zitkála-Šá places the Christianity of hell fire in stark contrast to the Great Spirit who offers "Infinite Love" (117). Zitkála-Šá uses that contrast and her textual portrait of the Converted Indian to speak out strongly against her Christian critics (specifically, in a reference to the "'Christian' pugilist" who described one of her stories as "morally bad" 265) and to warn her fellow Native Americans against the dangers of blind assimilation. She invites her readers to lay aside such abusive dogma and follow her into her "natural gardens" where the voice of the Great Spirit can be heard by both the "pale-faced missionary" and the "hoodooed aborigine" (117). In this context, "hoodooed" refers to those Native Americans like the Indian convert who have been tricked into embracing a superstition that compels them to abandon their strength that is their Indian identity.

Compared to the converted Indian, Zitkála-Šá's own strength and identity emerged from the transcultural space wherein she could embrace her identity a woman who is both white and Native American, particularly when considering Robin DeRosa's observation that for Zitkála-Šá, assimilation was "not a simple matter of erasure or overtaking." Instead, she entered that space and emerged with "the colonizer's tools" by writing in English, which is "a kind of resistance" but also a "position of power," a space that Zitkála-Šá was successful in occupying in the dominant society where women of color were traditionally excluded (192). Even if that position was also a source of conflict

and pain for her, her remarkable ability to navigate that space and articulate it for both Native Americans and non-Native Americans is evident in her own writing as well as in Käsebier's portraits of her.

The connection between Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá opened a space that encouraged a transcultural exchange, a collaboration that facilitated the production of Käsebier's Indian portraits, including Zitkála-Šá's, and Zitkála-Šá's legends and autobiographical stories, work that was created using a gendered, photographic aesthetic. This aesthetic encouraged their white audiences to see Native Americans newly as complex individuals and not as racialized stereotypes at a time when other photographers (Curtis) were perpetuating stereotypical images of Native Americans. At the same time, that exchange also provided an opportunity for them to create or to reinforce their own identities as women and as artists. While there is still little historical information to elaborate on their collaboration, there is enough to underscore the importance of this collaboration. Through their collaboration, both artists successfully reached beyond the cultural gender norms, using the margins of dominant white male culture and Käsebier's studio as transcultural spaces in which a new way of seeing emerged in order to resist erasure, racial stereotypes, and restrictive gender norms.



## Chapter 2

### Women of the Soil: Willa Cather and Laura Gilpin

While there is an abundance of scholarly work on the novels of Willa Cather, the connections between writer Willa Cather and photographer Laura Gilpin are less known. Cather's influence on one of the first successful female landscape photographers is evident in many of Gilpin's images as well as in a proposed collaborative project that never came to fruition. However, what further connected Cather and Gilpin was the geography, and the indigenous cultural history of the American Southwest at a time when there was a national effort to redefine American culture by seeking out what anthropologist and historian, George Stocking, referred to as a "genuine cultures" (290), which included the cultures of the Southwestern Native Americans. Within this space produced by their connection, Cather and Gilpin utilized a gendered photographic aesthetic in ways that differed from Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá. Unlike Zitkála-Šá, Cather includes, in varying degrees, photographic language, or she inserts references to fictional photographs in her novels, specifically *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. This provides a way for her to establish the identities of strong female characters as artists and/or women of the soil, as well as a way to question the gender norms of the early twentieth century. While the bulk of Käsebier's work focused on portraiture of white Americans, her studio portraits of Native Americans, as well as her mentorship of Gilpin, may have influenced Gilpin's work, which centered around landscapes and Native American subjects photographed on the land where they lived and worked. Further, both Cather and Gilpin were part of a web

of connections, a key element of a gendered photographic aesthetic that influenced their work. One of Cather's mentors, Sarah Orne Jewett, is the writer who created the term "human documents," and she both encouraged and provided feedback on Cather's work. Jewett and Cather corresponded until Jewett's death in 1909 (Stout 99). As Gilpin's mentor, Käsebier "embraced Laura as a colleague who shared her passion for photography" (Sandweiss 42), but it was Cather's passion for the land, which Gilpin shared, expressed through novels like *The Professor's House*, that may have sparked Gilpin's desire to collaborate with the author.

According to Gilpin's biographer, Gilpin suggested creating an illustrated version of Cather's *The Professor's House* that would include her photographs of Mesa Verde (Sandweiss 44). Cather had traveled to the American Southwest region (New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and even Mexico) several times, and according to a letter to friend and writer Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, traveling to this region "drove her crazy with delight" (*Selected Letters*, 209). Her trip in 1912 resulted in her depiction of Panther Canyon in *The Song of the Lark*, published in 1915. When she visited again in 1915, it was this journey, which included her experience at Mesa Verde in Colorado that "would eventually give her Tom Outland's story" (231) at Blue Mesa (based on Mesa Verde) in *The Professor's House*, published in 1925. Gilpin also had traveled to Mesa Verde in Colorado in the Fall of 1924. Afterward, Gilpin asked a mutual friend of both hers and Cather's, photographer Alice Boughton (another female photographer mentored by Gertrude Käsebier along with Gilpin,) to act as an intermediary to broach the idea of a collaboration between Gilpin and Cather, where Gilpin's photographs would accompany a special edition of *The Professor's House*. This is significant as it suggests Gilpin's

awareness of Cather's work and their shared affinity for the western and southwestern landscapes.

This affinity connects them not only to each other, but also to a moment in U.S. history that George Stocking referred to as the overlapping of "anthropological discourse and the discourse of cultural criticism in the early 1920s" (287) as a result of a desire to avoid association with European culture as well as to throw off the "worn-out values of the 'puritan' tradition, by connecting to "genuine cultures" like Native American cultures, both living and ancient. It also connects them to what early twentieth-century literary critic Van Wyck Brooks referred to as seeking out a "usable past" (339), because American writers did not have a deep history to inform their work as did European writers, thus Brooks suggested they create one. He explains, "The present is a void, and the American writer floats in that void because the past that survives in the common mind of the present is a past without living value" (339); therefore, why not "[d]iscover, invent a usable past?" Cather discovered such a past in the American Southwest, an ancient Native American past with living value that informed her work in *The Song of the Lark*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Actually, the emergence of the Southwest in the white, American imagination began in the late 1800s "after the first photographic images were displayed at the Centennial in Philadelphia...and after the publication of the Smithsonian reports of Holmes, Stevenson, and Cushing" (Babcock 1). What captured both cultural and scientific imaginations involved a "combination of an open, unspoiled landscape and a settled, agrarian, highly developed Native American population...a timeless, Edenic image that contrasted sharply with the unhealthy, aggressive, industrial culture of the

eastern and Midwestern United States” (7), or the Babbitry to which Stocking referred. This region informed Cather’s usable past, as it also informed Gilpin’s early work and allowed her to connect with one of the first women anthropologists, Ruth Underhill, who was studying the Native American cultures in the Southwest at the time Gilpin was photographing that region. Gilpin even took a photographic portrait of her, and Underhill included some of Gilpin’s photos in a children’s book she wrote on the Navaho. Eventually, Gilpin would progress from creating and photographing images evoking that romanticized past in favor of photographing real Native Americans in the present, as in the photographs collected in her book *Enduring Navahos*.

Both couple their evocation of a usable past with the application of a gendered photographic aesthetic by presenting the landscape as a female entity, not to conquer, but to celebrate as a nurturing space wherein they can construct their identities as artists. For Cather, this involved using language in her descriptions that approximated female anatomy and the nurturing qualities often associated with the female gender. The idea of the land-as-female was not new. Kolodny asserts that this notion is “probably America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy,” which is “not simply the land as mother, but the land as a woman, the total female principle of gratification” (4). Indeed, many of Cather’s female characters draw strength and identity from the land, much like the women who lived and thrived upon the land in Gilpin’s photographs. In addition, some of Cather’s characters connected not only to the land but also to the historic legacy of ancient Native American female artists who had lived on the land, as evidenced by the artifacts of the cliff dwellers, ancient Indian cultures Cather references in two of her novels, *The Song of the Lark* and *The Professor’s House*. This, too, connects to the idea of the land as female

given the first European explorers' initial impressions of Indian women "as a kind of emblem for [the] land" (5). Later, that image warped into the nineteenth-century sexualized stereotypes of Indian women, "depicted more usually as hag-like...and immoral" (5), the kind of stereotypical images Zitkála-Šá resisted. Gilpin's early photographs presented images featuring costumed contemporary Native Americans acting as models for ancient cliff-dwelling women within the ruins, like Mesa Verde. She included these images in her book called, *Mesa Verde National Park*, published in 1927, before she embarked on her project photographing Native Americans like the Navaho.

*Mesa Verde National Park* was a companion volume to her collection of photographs and accompanying text, *The Pike's Peak Region*, published in 1926. She even established the Gilpin Publishing Company, which published both volumes, hoping they "would be the first of many on southwestern sites that she could produce herself and market to tourists through the Fred Harvey Company" (Sandweiss 47). Gilpin hoped the sale of these volumes would allow her to support herself while establishing her career as a photographer. The Mesa Verde photographs are, perhaps, some of the images Gilpin was hoping to include as part of a possible collaboration with Cather. And although they both applied a gendered, photographic aesthetic in text and in photographs in their treatment of the land and their Native American subjects, their work engendered criticism that pointed to racial, romanticizing bias toward the ways they portrayed Native Americans.

Jonathan Goldberg, who wrote a response to Sandweiss's account of the failed collaboration, points to somewhat race-based criticisms of Cather's and Gilpin's work, specifically with regard to their depictions of Native Americans (as does Sandweiss). He

sites the criticism of Cather's distance from her ancient Native American subjects as evidence she preferred dead Native Americans as opposed to living ones, thereby eliminating the need for an exchange of gazes, particularly when those Native American subjects could no longer gaze back (Goldberg 67). He also draws attention to criticism of Gilpin's soft focus and Indian models posing as ancient cliff dwellers as "link[ing] Gilpin to a tradition of syrupy [historical] romance" (67). Sandweiss adds that the volume of Mesa Verde photographs and the text that Gilpin wrote to accompany her images did contain romanticizing language, particularly when she concludes, "And it must always be with a sense of romance gathered about a forgotten people, as well as with appreciation of the beauty of the country itself, that one remembers Mesa Verde" (*Mesa Verde National Park* n.p.). Gilpin later regretted her use of romanticizing language and images, even while a gendered photographic aesthetic continued to inform much of what she produced. Like Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá, Cather's and Gilpin's work serves to push back against gender norms at that time by depicting women, both white and Native American, as strong and independent. But unlike Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá, Cather and Gilpin, are connected to each other through their depictions of an often-feminized landscape.

With regard to Gilpin's feminized landscapes, one can hypothesize that Cather's descriptions of the land in several of her novels may have provided inspiration for Gilpin's images at a time when Gilpin was beginning to establish herself as a landscape photographer. It's reasonable to assume Gilpin must have read *The Professor's House* before she suggested a collaboration with Cather. Further, on a subsequent trip to the Navaho reservation that Gilpin's friend and companion Betsy took in 1931, she took with her "a much-loved copy of *Willa Cather's Death Comes for the Archbishop*. It is possible

that Gilpin's work may have inspired Cather, particularly after considering a comparison of Gilpin's photograph, "The Prairie" (fig.15), which features a small but strongly erect female character standing upon a vast, windy expanse of prairie. This is the kind of image that would repeat in Cather's novels, as in Gilpin's work, landscapes populated by women.

In Cather's later work, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (DCA), there is less of a photographic aesthetic with regard to photographic language, but the southwestern landscape and Native Americans figure prominently in this novel. This novel does not focus on the use of a gendered photographic aesthetic with regard to forming female identity and the connection to the land, though there are many women of the desert soil throughout this novel. Instead, Cather places emphasis on descriptions of the land, and cliff dwellings reappear almost as a character, similarly to how they are treated in both *The Song of the Lark* and *The Professor's House*. Most importantly, there's some evidence to suggest that in addition to *The Song of the Lark* and *The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* may have also had an influence on Gilpin with regard to her photography of those same landscapes.

In addition to feminizing her landscapes, which I will explore in greater detail later in this chapter, Cather applied a gendered photographic aesthetic in order to create her narrative spaces that pushed against social norms consigning women's fiction to the margins. However, her initial relationship with the notion of gender as it pertained to women writers is problematic on several levels and was certainly influenced by those norms. In an article published in 1895 in the *Courier*, before she'd written her own novels, Cather's caustic review of the work of nineteenth-century British female author

Ouida<sup>4</sup> included the following statement: “Sometimes I wonder why God ever trusts talent in the hands of women, they usually make such an infernal mess of it” (275, *The World and the Parish, Vol. 1*). While Cather believed, “It is a solemn and terrible thing to write a novel” (276), which she, herself, had not yet done when she wrote this, she concluded, “I have not much faith in women in fiction. They have a sort of sex consciousness that is abominable... Women are so horribly subjective and they have such a scorn for the healthy commonplace” (276, 277). However, it is this “healthy commonplace” Cather herself would explore later in what she referred to as her novels of the soil. In a review Cather wrote of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* in 1899 for the *Pittsburg Leader*, she echoes this initial sentiment, criticizing Chopin for creating a character like Edna Pontellier, who longs to be an artist, but Cather doesn’t address Edna’s struggle to create an identity as an artist. Rather, Cather claims Pontellier belongs to a class of people, a class who “demands more romance out of life than God put into it” (*The World and the Parish, Vol. 11* 698) and she hopes that next time, Chopin “will devote that flexible, iridescent style of hers to a better cause” (699). Ironically, Cather will later create a female character who becomes a successful artist in *The Song of the Lark*, indicating a change in her attitude about gender with respect to women artists, including herself.

There are further complications regarding Cather and gender discussed in feminist and queer readings of her work. While some of her biographers, like James Woodress, maintain Cather was ambivalent about heterosexual marriage as “she had no need to get married for companionship, for she already had a large circle of friends” and instead, she “was married to her art and sublimated her sexual impulses in her work” (125), others,



like Hermione Lee, argue that “Cather is diminished by being enlisted to a [feminist] cause” (12). Lee further warns that to read Cather’s fiction solely as an encoding of covert homosexuality “assumes that the work is written only in order to express homosexual feeling in disguise; it makes her out to be a coward (which was certainly not one of her failings)” (11). Judith Butler maintains a similar stance in her chapter on Cather in *Bodies That Matter*, “It is not easy to know how to read gender or sexuality in Willa Cather’s fiction. Cather has appeared not to place herself in a legible relation to women or to lesbianism” (143). Finally, Janis Stout suggests that Cather moved between genders (as does Lee), conscious of performing both in her life as well as in her fiction (58). For example, she takes on a male voice in *The Professor’s House* and *My Ántonia*, while also giving a female character, like Thea, a powerful voice heard on the world stage. Stout also maintains with regard to her possible lesbian relationship with Isabelle McClung, it “can never be known” but “[i]f it was, it is little wonder that she would have wished to conceal its nature, since both the categorizing and the stigmatizing of lesbians greatly increased during the early years of the twentieth century” (55). While many women writers and artists of Cather’s time occupied the cultural margins, speculation on Cather’s coded homosexuality demonstrates how much further into the margins her work might have been pushed had she articulated or represented mimetically “the love that dare not speak its name” (Butler 152). However, Butler goes on to argue that even though Lee discusses Cather’s cross identification with both male and female genders, it is Cather’s use of names that destabilizes gender and separates gender from sexuality.

For example, names like “Jim Burden” and “Tom Outland” are masculine names, but when examined more closely with regard to how Cather creates each character, this

destabilization becomes more evident. Jim Burden is an arguably asexual character burdened by his obsession with *Ántonia*. According to Lee, he is “an androgynous narrator who mediates between male and female worlds” (153). He also articulates societal norms in the way he judges *Ántonia*, who he feels violates those norms. Tom Outland, a man living in the margins of society in a household of men near Blue Mesa, must negotiate “*dangerous crossings*” that the character, Roddy Blake, exclaims are “painted on sign-boards all over the world!” (*The Professor’s House* 223) Butler explains that “crossing” and “passing” were terms of “historical importance...for lesbians at the turn of the century” (163). Whether Cather meant to imply Tom was a sexual outlander is unclear. Cather describes Tom’s relationships with Roddy Blake and Godfrey St. Peter in details that reveal an intimacy, a tenderness between them that is noticeably absent with regard to his engagement to St. Peter’s oldest daughter. In other ways, he remains an outlander who is outside both the history of the ancient culture he discovers on the mesa and outside the culture to which he appeals to help preserve the remains of that ancient culture. Through names like these, Cather can both articulate the gender social norms and also subvert them.

However, what was most important to Cather, as Sharon O’Brien points out, was the use of her fictions “to imagine and create a self” (7). Cather articulates this through the words of Thea Kronborg’s music teacher, Harsanyi, who tells Thea, “Every artist makes himself born” (*Song of the Lark* 162), though, in spite of her early criticism of woman authors, she began to understand that the path of the woman artist is not an easy one. In a letter to Read Bain in 1931, she admitted “it is a very distinct disadvantage to be a Lady Author” (*Selected Letters* 436). In spite of this, O’Brien asserts that “once Cather

had reconciled the woman and the artist [within herself], she could write from her necessarily female experience without feeling that she was limited to telling a woman's story" (5), particularly as *The Professor's House*, published five years before Cather's letter to Bain, is narrated by two male characters. She worked hard to become an artist, honing her craft, creating strong female and male characters who, perhaps like herself, navigated "dangerous crossings" (*The Professor's House* 223) of their own.

Later in her life, Cather commented on her first two novels in an article appearing in *The Colophon* in 1936, describing how she flouted literary convention with regard to women writers. Women's fiction at that time relegated the setting of the novel to "the drawing-room [which] was considered the proper setting for a novel" because "the 'novel of the soil' had not then come into fashion in this country" (*Willa Cather on Writing* 93). In creating the "novel of the soil," Lee claims Cather is "not only acting out a desire to transcend, imaginatively, expected sexual roles (although she is doing that); more impersonally, she is intervening in a masculine language of epic pastoral" because the western frontier "was a man's world, subjected to masculine pioneering and male speech" (5). In creating Thea and Antonia as women of the soil, she asserts that women and women artists belong outside on the land, working it, writing about it, and with regard to Gilpin, photographing it. Gilpin's "images of the soil" are equally prescient as she produced these at a time when there were very few women landscape photographers. Like women writers, women photographers were expected to limit themselves to the "drawing-room," to domestic scenes and subjects, producing images like Käsebier started out creating. Like Cather, Gilpin was intervening in the "epic pastoral" of the masculine, pioneering landscape. Even today, her images of Western landscapes are less known than

the work of her contemporary, Ansel Adams. Nonetheless, through their work, both she and Cather offered a new way of seeing land and identity through a gendered, photographic aesthetic.

Whatever the reasons for the failed collaboration, Goldberg points out the only evidence for this proposed project was in a letter Alice Boughton wrote to Gilpin in 1929 (64). He states that it's uncertain whether Cather ever heard of Gilpin's proposal. Only one of Cather's novels was ever illustrated, the first edition of *My Ántonia*. This edition included woodcuts by illustrator, W.T. Benda, but Goldberg maintains that, with regard to an illustrated version of *The Professor's House*, "It is unlikely that Cather would have welcomed Gilpin's illustrations even if they bettered Tom's work...[because] Cather depended on her words to do what a 'kodak' could not" (64). The quality of Gilpin's photographs produced with a professional camera was far better than an image that might have been produced by a Kodak. Further, what Goldberg doesn't mention that contradicts his statement about Cather's disinclination to welcome Gilpin's photographs is that Cather was personally involved in the design of the illustrations in *My Ántonia*. James Woodress explains in the textual commentary of a scholarly edition of the novel that Cather expected he (Benda) would not only "study the text," he would also use the "western photographs...which Cather had gone to some trouble to collect" (487) in order to produce his illustrations precisely as Cather envisioned. There's no elaboration on whose photographs Cather collected, but this is significant because years before she published her first novel, Cather indicated her affinity for photography and a photographic aesthetic in an article she published in 1891 in both the *Nebraska State Journal* and the *Hesperian*. In her piece on Thomas Carlyle, she extolled him as a verbal

artist because his pictures “were not wild sketches of imagination, but were photographs from nature” (423). Cather was praising Carlyle’s ability to create literary paintings, but her comparison of his imagery to “photographs from nature” is notable considering she stated this at a time when photography was a relatively new medium of artistic expression. Cather’s recognition of photography as an art form indicates her early awareness of an emerging modernist photographic aesthetic that she would eventually incorporate into her work, offering us not only new ways to see her women of the soil but new ways to read novels such as *The Song of the Lark*, *My Ántonia*, and *The Professor’s House*.

Cather also understood how to use the photographic portrait to create and to promote her own identity as a writer, having been photographed by Edward Steichen, a prominent member of Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession group (as was Käsebier). Indeed, one of the photographs of her (fig.12) taken by Steichen is mentioned specifically and described glowingly by Katherine Anne Porter in a review of Cather’s work in 1952. In



Fig. 12 Steichen’s portrait of Cather in 1926, Bradbrook



Fig. 13 Annie Sadilek Pavelka, c.1886, Moon Block, Red Cloud, Neb., Courtesy of The Willa Cather Archive

addition, the Cather family archives house many photographs of friends and relatives, including a portrait of Annie Sadilek Pavelka (fig. 13), a friend of the Cather family who became the inspiration for the character *Ántonia* Shimerda in *My Ántonia*, and a portrait of Annie's first child Lucille Pavelka. Lucille's portrait (fig. 14), a color print, closely resembles the description of the portrait Jim Burden discovers in the photographer's studio in *Black Hawk*. Even if Cather chose not to include physical portraits in her novels, it's clear she applies a gendered photographic aesthetic in the way she uses descriptions of fictional photographs (some of which are based on actual photographs) to create the histories and identities of her female characters, particularly in ways that push back against gender norms by presenting images of women characters whose lives are not defined or restricted by the domestic sphere.

In her article on the Benda illustrations in *My Ántonia*, Jean Schwind asserts that the pictures, both textual and real, "are not expendable decorations but an essential part of the novel" (387). This also includes her use of photographic language. Cather's fictional photographs, like the ones she includes in *My Ántonia* and *The Professor's House*, and the few mentioned in *The Song of the Lark*, are critical because they perform distinct functions within their narratives. In *The Professor's House*, they are a record of a place and a culture, depicting the artifacts that are sacred to Tom Outland. They also function as artifacts themselves after Blake sells the actual artifacts to the German collector. Though they seem to play less of a role in *The Song of the Lark*, the photo in Thea's room in Mrs. Lorch's home and the photo of Thea in costume as she is about to claim her success as a Wagnerian opera singer provide a frame for Thea's development as an artist. In *My Ántonia*, the portrait of *Ántonia*'s daughter and her box of photographs are the

definitive last word on her history and identity as defined by herself. Clearly, Cather understood the importance of photographic images and the use of a photographic aesthetic within these novels, even if she only sanctioned one illustrated edition of a novel.

The photographs mentioned in *The Song of the Lark* are more peripheral in the narrative than the photos in *My Ántonia* or *The Professor's House*, but they are an early indication of Cather's inclination to incorporate a photographic aesthetic as a way to create a woman artist's identity. Linda Huf considers this novel Cather's *Künstlerroman* (a novel about the development of a central character who is an artist), stating that "Cather's story of how a single-minded desert girl [an artist] secures her place in the sun was largely her own story" (83). Huf also points out that Cather flouts gender norms here by rendering the male characters "unlike the men in other artist novels by women" particularly because they are "teachers and friends more than suitors and lovers" (84). Therefore, they present no opposition to Thea Kronborg's focus on becoming an artist who would eventually perform on the world stage. This is uncharacteristic of gender norms of that time, particularly when Thea doesn't marry until after she's achieved her success. The sentiment of ruthlessly focusing on developing one's art above all else is lauded in male artists who have lovers, wives, and patrons to support them. Thea is supported throughout her career by sympathetic men who don't press her toward marriage, so, unlike other women artists, she has the time and space to practice tirelessly to improve her musical skills. Her journey to Chicago to study music under the tutelage of Andar Harsanyi marks the beginning of her professional career. Here, she rents a room in Mrs. Lorch's home, and while living there she buys a photograph, which she has

framed, to hang on the wall in her room. While this may seem like a small, insignificant detail, the fact that Thea buys few things for herself draws attention to this photograph.

Thea's photograph is an image of a Naples bust of Julius Caesar. Cather's narrator describes this image with its "grim bald head" as "a curious choice, but she [Thea] was at the age when people do inexplicable things" (157), like not hanging images of composers, given that she was there to develop her musical career. Cather gives no specific information about the sculptor or which bust of Caesar the photograph depicts, but this particular bust seems to represent Caesar as a mature emperor. Cather does reveal that Thea "loved to read about great generals" (157), leading Julie Olin-Ammentorp to surmise that to Thea, the bust of Caesar "suggests her recognition and admiration of power, which in turn suggests that she may recognize—if only subconsciously—that power, and even a certain ruthlessness, are also elements in herself that she will need to come to terms with in order to succeed in her profession" (185). Cather, herself, initially identified with and admired male writers, implying that a woman must assume these (traditionally male) qualities, perhaps even the qualities of a Roman conqueror, in order to become a great artist. This photograph would provide a daily reminder to the young artist to martial continual focus and discipline on attaining her goal to become a great artist. Years earlier, Cather articulated this sentiment in a review of a performance by opera singer Madame Helena von Doenhoff that she penned for the *Nebraska State Journal* in 1895 titled, "Married Nightingales Seldom Sing." In this article she talks about the sacrifices an artist has to make in order to be truly great, saying "complete self-abnegation is the one step between brilliancy and greatness, between promise and fulfillment" and that because Doenhoff "dabbled in matrimony," it robbed her of the



patience and endurance necessary to succeed (*The World and the Parish*, 176). The photograph of the bust of Caesar is an indicator that dabbling in matrimony was not going to be Thea's or Cather's destiny.

The second photograph is of Thea, herself, a large photograph of her in the costume she wore for her debut performance as a Wagnerian opera singer, "her eyes looking up, her beautiful hands outspread with pleasure" (*Song of the Lark* 364). This image represents Thea's success achieved by first harnessing the grim determination and power of a Roman general in the initial photograph, qualities she needed in order to conquer her craft. In the scene where this second photograph appears, Doctor Archie is visiting Thea's dying mother, who keeps this image "on the dresser at the foot of her bed" (363). By this time, Thea is in Germany, studying and performing, an artist who recognizes that she could not leave to go see her sick mother or she'd risk "losing everything" (363) although she planned to bring her mother to Germany as soon as she was free, perhaps in six months. Mrs. Kronborg didn't live that long. By juxtaposing this photograph so closely to the image of Doctor Archie acting as a pall bearer at Mrs. Kronborg's funeral, Cather underscores the kinds of sacrifices artists must be willing to make.

The majority of Thea's career as an artist, including her pivotal experience in Panther Canyon, is bracketed by these two photographs. Eventually, this nightingale did marry, but only after she's had a successful career. Cather mentions her marriage almost as an afterthought, included in the novel's epilogue when Thea is clearly established as a success and at the height of her singing career. This seems to show Cather reconsidering the idea that women could be great artists (Gertrude Käsebier was a wife, mother, and

successful photographer) while also being wives and mothers, but only if a woman's artistry comes first. While Kate Chopin's artist/protagonist Edna Pontellier pays the ultimate price for pursuing an artistic career over embracing the gender norm of being wife and mother, Thea Kronborg ventures outside that gender norm and becomes a celebrated artist. Thea does marry in the end, but marriage is clearly subordinate to her art because, in Thea's own words, "Who marries who is a small matter, after all" (412).

There are no living women artists in *The Professor's House* (aside from Kathleen's aborted pursuit of painting), but the fictional photographs in this novel have an equally important role in the novel's middle section, "Tom Outland's Story." Unlike *The Song of the Lark*, the photographs in "Tom Outland's Story" are framed by two narrative sections involving the lives of Godfrey St. Peter and his family. According to Janis Stout, Cather "builds her novels through an episodic accretion of focused and compressed, apparently simple scenes displayed against contextual vacancy" (*Strategies of Reticence* 71). This is particularly true of *The Professor's House*, where each section can be "read" like a photo album; an album is also vacant of content until "compressed...scenes" in the form of photographs are posted in it. Unlike the photos in *My Ántonia* or *The Song of the Lark*, these have been taken by the characters Tom and Blake with "a small Kodak" and according to Tom, "these pictures didn't make much show, —looked, indeed, like grubby little 'dobe ruins such as one can find almost anywhere. They gave no idea of the beauty and vastness of the setting" (*The Professor's House* 204). They are photographs of the cliff dwellings at Blue Mesa, and they are never described in detail. These photographs were taken to document the discovery of an ancient civilization on Blue Mesa, which Cather describes in a way that likens them to

the real cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde. In the end, Tom's photographs become artifacts of artifacts after Blake sells their findings to a German collector of "Indian things" (214) while Tom is back east trying to interest The Smithsonian in excavating the site. These photographs not only embody the memory and history of a vanished civilization, they are also a record of loss, especially because they are bracketed by St. Peter's story, a historian who is also a man becoming an artifact himself. In the third section of the novel he even likens himself to "Tom's old cliff-dwellers" (241). Tom experiences this loss not just of the things, but of what those things represented, an indigenous history to which he, an orphan, could attach himself. He has discovered a "genuine culture" within a usable past. In his last conversation with Blake, he even refers to the creators of the artifacts as "the pots and pans that belonged to my poor grandmothers a thousand years ago" (219). Tom is orphaned a second time with the loss of the mummified Indian woman they named "Mother Eve" whose body plunges into the canyon when the mule carrying her loses his footing as the artifacts are being transported off the mesa. This raises other issues and questions about Cather's relationship to an American cultural impulse to appropriate Indian ancestry as white American history and as part of the aforementioned "Indian Craze," but Cather complicates this notion when Virginia Ward's character tells Tom that the experts at the Smithsonian "don't care much about dead and gone Indians" (212). This compounds Tom's feeling of failure because of his inability to interest them in Blue Mesa, and it anticipates Tom's later experience of loss. Where the photographs in *The Song of the Lark* play a part in constructing the identity of a woman artist, Tom's photographs become all that's left of a woman and of a history to which he attaches his identity. It's very likely that Tom photographed "Mother Eve" along with the other

artifacts and that photograph would widen what Roland Barthes refers to as the “tension of History, its division” particularly when it involves the life of someone “whose existence has somewhat preceded our own” (65). Tom is forever divided from “Mother Eve” and also from his partner, Blake, who betrayed him. Further, Tom believed Blue Mesa and its contents belonged not just to him but to everyone. Therefore, the selling of the artifacts is also a loss on a national level. To that end, Cather may have considered it unnecessary to describe the photos or include actual photographs in an illustrated version of the novel, particularly if they were meant to represent that kind of loss.

Finally, Tom admits that in his photographs, the cliff dwellings lose their grandeur, the beauty of Blue Mesa that so moves him. After the devastating loss of the artifacts and Mother Eve, he discovers that the loss enabled him to lose his original feeling that was “mixed up with other motives” (227) and to reconnect to the mesa with a “religious emotion” (226, 227) much in the same way Thea experiences Panther Canyon in *The Song of the Lark* (which will be discussed in more detail later). It’s understandable, then, that Gilpin would want to accomplish what Tom Outland could not, produce images that would capture the “beauty and vastness” and the “religious emotion” of the place that captured Cather’s imagination.

There is beauty and vastness in Cather’s depiction of the open prairie land in *My Ántonia* as well, but unlike in *The Professor’s House*, her use of fictional photographs in this novel provide a crucial pivotal point in the narrative in the way they serve to create Ántonia’s identity. They can also be connected to real photographs of people upon whom Cather based particular characters. As for the importance of the fictional photographs, this becomes clear after the first mention of a photograph in “The Pioneer Woman’s

Story” chapter where Jim Burden discovers one of those “depressing crayon enlargements often seen in farmhouse parlours” (*My Ántonia* 225). Jim doesn’t recognize the face, which turns out to be a photograph of Ántonia’s first child displayed in the town photography studio where he’s gone to arrange for a sitting to have his grandparents’ picture taken. James Woodress states that Cather’s description of the Black Hawk photography studio was based on Frank Bradbrook’s studio on Webster Street in Red Cloud, Nebraska (Cather’s hometown), the town upon which the fictional Black Hawk is based (explanatory note 295, 472 in the scholarly edition of *My Ántonia*). The *Willa Cather Archive Image Gallery* at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln includes numerous photographs from the late 1800s of members of Cather’s family, including portraits of a young Cather, taken at the Bradbrook studio. In addition, Bradbrook also took a portrait of Annie Sadilek Pavelka (fig. 13) who remained Cather’s friend for many years. It’s likely that the fictional photo of Ántonia’s child was also based on reality. Annie Pavelka bore her first child out of wedlock after being abandoned by her husband and the description of the fictional photograph of Ántonia’s child is remarkably similar to the real photograph of Annie’s child Lucille in the photo archives of the Nebraska State Historical society. (This photograph appears on page 427 of the scholarly edition of the novel.) It’s significant, then, that Cather positions Ántonia’s child’s portrait among other “likenesses on the walls” in the photography studio in Black Hawk that depict: “girls in Commencement dresses, country brides and grooms holding hands, family groups of three generations” (*My Ántonia* 225). This scene not only anticipates the later scene involving Ántonia’s box of photographs, it is the first moment where Cather depicts Ántonia using a photograph as an instrument in the process of constructing her own



Fig. 14 Lucille Pavelka, born 1892  
Nebraska State Historical Society

identity independent of Jim's story of her. Having a photograph taken of her illegitimate child and proudly displaying it in the midst of photographs of socially acceptable photographic subjects and refusing to place the portrait in a cheap frame legitimizes and emphasizes the value of this part of her life. This, among other things, is in direct conflict with nineteenth-century gender norms, which Jim's character reflects when he judges this part of *Ántonia's* life with disapproval and disappointment. Cather not only presents the character of *Ántonia* as a strong woman who is unapologetic about not conforming to nineteenth-century gender norms, Cather also elevates the status of photographs as a legitimate means to create female identity and history, as she began to do in *The Song of the Lark*, particularly when female identity and history venture outside of those norms.

The style of the fictional baby's portrait as a "crayon enlargement" is also significant in two ways. First, it references an actual photo-related process used in the late 1800s that Woodress describes as "drawings made by projecting a photographic image and tracing it with crayons" (472). Second, the treatment of the baby's portrait through adding color, smoothes the mimetic details so that Jim's and the readers' focus is drawn

to the eyes of that “round-eyed baby” (*My Ántonia* 225), providing an example of how Cather applies a photographic aesthetic, but also subordinates the mimetic function of photography. This portrait is also an example of how Cather uses a Pictorialist style of photography in her language. While the intent of the photographer is to provide an identifiable image of a specific child, that reality is softened through color and the focus on those round eyes. Jim responds to the photograph not because he sees a biological resemblance to Ántonia in mimetic detail of her child’s face, he responds instead to a “depressing” (225) image of a child in a way that not only reflects nineteenth-century gender norms, it also reveals a self-absorbed artifice in his version of Ántonia’s story, evident only after the photographer identifies the baby’s image. Cather uses this photograph of Ántonia’s baby to begin to show how Jim’s story of Ántonia is not Ántonia’s story. When he fails to recognize the child and then judges her, saying he could forgive her only “if she hadn’t thrown herself away on such a cheap sort of fellow” (225), he reflects the gender norm that condemns the woman who has a child out of wedlock but not the “cheap sort of fellow” who abandons her.

After a span of twenty years, Jim Burden visits Ántonia again. Ironically, while Jim now recognizes the uniqueness of “simply Ántonia’s eyes” (244), Ántonia doesn’t at first recognize him when they come face-to-face. After Jim shares dinner with her family, Ántonia brings out “a big boxful of photographs” (255). Historian Kenneth P. Czech explains how photography’s popularity increased in the nineteenth century, when “people kept card photographs and tintypes in wicker baskets in the parlor” (46). He also recounts how in the late nineteenth century, daguerreotypes and tintypes fell in popularity when cheaper film photographs printed on paper became available. This is when people,

particularly women, began collecting and arranging photographs into albums. Cather doesn't reveal the kinds of photos that make up *Ántonia's* collection save for one tintype that her husband had taken of himself and one of their sons. *Ántonia* doesn't keep her photographs in an album, but they exist in a collection that grows as her family history expands. Cather describes the photographs one-by-one as if turning the pages in an album of *Ántonia's* history each time *Ántonia* "turned over the pictures" (256). Marilyn F. Motz talks about the significance of women's photograph albums between the years 1880 and 1920, "Like autobiographies, such albums presented women's constructions of their lives as they saw them and as they wished to have them seen by others" (63). This is how Cather represents *Ántonia's* box of photographs, as *Ántonia's* construction of her life.

Even though Jim admits to *Ántonia* twenty years prior to this dinner with her and her family that the "idea" of *Ántonia* was a part of his mind influencing all his "likes and dislikes" and all his "tastes, hundreds of times," and that she is really a part of him (237), *Ántonia's* big box of photographs demonstrates that his own notions, ideas, and pictures of her exist only within him. Cather has allowed *Ántonia*, in the tradition of other turn-of-the-century Midwestern women, to create her own identity through these photographs. It is a "big box" to hold the richness of a life she has constructed for herself, as evidenced by the child's portrait Jim sees at the photography studio. *Ántonia* shares her pictures with Jim and with her family, "turning over" evidence of a life that Jim has not or would not share, making a mockery of his "bulging legal portfolio" (6) that Jim produces in the frame narrative that contained his manuscript of his scattered, unformed pictures of his version of her life. *Ántonia's* photographs are very specific and include: "she and Anton in their wedding clothes, holding hands; her brother Ambrosch and his very fat wife, who



had a farm of her own, and who bossed her husband...the three Marys and their large families” (255, 256). *Ántonia*’s family verify her identity represented by the photographs as they “contemplated the photographs with pleased recognition; looked at some admiringly.” Similar to his reaction to seeing the portrait of *Ántonia*’s first child, Jim witnesses the construction of an *Ántonia* that is not his *Ántonia* and editorializes about the children’s misplaced admiration of the images in their mother’s photographs, “as if these characters in their mother’s girlhood had been remarkable people” (256). *Ántonia* keeps pictures of these individuals because they helped to construct her identity that she now shares with family.

Other photographs in *Ántonia*’s box include a portrait of Lena “that had come from San Francisco last Christmas” indicating that Lena, too, is part of her life in a way Jim is not. Another photograph depicts Mr. Harling. Then there’s a photograph of Francis Harling “in a befrogged riding costume” (256). Like *Ántonia*, and *Ántonia*’s child, the fictional photograph of Francis corresponds to a real photograph of Carrie Miner, the woman who Cather used as a model for Francis. The whole fictional Harling family was based on real members of the Miner family that Cather grew up with in Red Cloud. The scholarly edition of *My Ántonia* includes the real photograph of Carrie Miner taken in 1890 (417), posing in front of a fence in a real “befrogged riding costume.” The caption to this photograph states “Cather kept this picture on her desk” (416). According to James Woodress, Cather and the Miner sisters remained lifelong friends. Cather’s connection to and affection for Carrie Miner is also evidenced by the fact that Cather dedicates *My Ántonia* to Carrie and her sister, Irene. One can argue that Cather, too, like *Ántonia*, kept

pictures of these individuals because they were part of her history, a history that helped to shape her own identity.

Jim, too, has sent photographs to *Ántonia* of “the old country” (253) when he visited Bohemia, but they are not included in *Ántonia*’s big box. They are formalized, framed and hung on the wall of the parlor, indicating their importance. In spite of the prominence these photographs are accorded by being displayed, it’s significant that *Ántonia* doesn’t incorporate them into the album that constructs her personal identity. This emphasizes further that Jim’s mental pictures of her are his alone. *Ántonia* does keep two images of Jim, one cut from a Chicago newspaper that also doesn’t seem to be included in her big box, and a tintype of Jim as a young “awkward-looking boy in baggy clothes” (257) posing between the two farm hands Otto and Jake who worked on his grandparents’ farm. This is the Jim that *Ántonia* chooses to incorporate as a part of her album, the young Jim who had not yet created or collected his own proprietary images of her.

Aside from fictional photographs, Cather applies a gendered photographic aesthetic in other ways. As mentioned before, Cather also subordinates photography’s mimetic function in *My Ántonia* by using language that blends a Pictorialist photographic style with aspects of a more modernist sense of composition, capturing images or fragments of images that evoke the feel of modernist visual art while retaining some focused photographic details. For example, in one of her most famous images in *My Ántonia*, the plough at sunset scene, she concentrates on an abundance of details, like “curly grass,” “the bark of the oaks,” sandbars in the stream “glittering like glass,” But, when the “breeze sank to stillness” (182) those details soften until a single image

remains, the black silhouette of a plow against the disk of the sun, evoking a sense of Modernist design, an uncluttered composition that then fades when the fields grow dark and the sky grows pale (183). Cather herself articulated an appreciation for the uncluttered in an essay included in *Not Under Forty*, “The Novel D meubl .” Here, she states, “The higher processes of art are all processes of simplification” (48, 49). In the same way that a photograph is carefully composed, so is a textual image written on the page so that “[w]hatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear, but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact of the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel” (50). There is a distinct emotional aura in this scene where the characters Tiny,  ntonia, Lena, and Jim witness a sunset on the prairie that is often described as painterly, or even cinematic given the dramatic color and light Cather presents. However, the language Cather uses employs a photographic aesthetic as there is an emphasis on light, light that shimmers, touches, glitters, and trembles until it begins to soften across the prairie. With this softening, suggestive of Pictorialist photography, the composition simplifies with only the red disk of the setting sun, the horizontal light, and a single black figure that was “writing on the sun” (183). This in itself is an inverse of the definition of photography as “light writing.”

The dark shape of the plough against the disk of the sun is often considered a phallic symbol, but it can also be seen as a photographic negative, or as vulvar image where the dark spaces of the plough represent a space of entry as opposed to an object penetrating, as a plough does to a field. If Cather is identifying the land as female, this

female is powerful. In fact, it's as if the light and the land absorb the plough. Much has been written about Cather's use of the Modernist motif of using negative spaces like the plough on the great expanse of the land to place emphasis on what is not "specifically named there," or, in this case, using spaces like the open prairie as an expression of a sexual attraction that could not be named. Jo Ann Middleton describes these negative spaces as "vacuoles," borrowing a scientific term to define a space that "appears empty, but is not actually empty" (11), like a womb.

While Middleton concentrates on vacuoles as they appear in *The Professor's House*, these empty/non-empty spaces work in many of Cather's novels, including *The Song of the Lark* and *My Ántonia*. Middleton also uses a quotation from reader-response theorist, Wolfgang Iser to explain Cather's intent in using narrative vacuoles. Those empty spaces force the reader into a position where they "are thus led to produce images which, without habitual way of thinking we could not have conceived" (Iser quoted in Middleton 109). Combined with the fact that she applies a gendered photographic aesthetic when rendering these vacuoles as moments on the page, Cather encourages the reader to engage in a new way of seeing and makes those moments stand apart in the narrative. The vacuole of the black plough opens an alternative space to see and experience these instances apart from a "habitual way of thinking" informed by a male-centered culture much like Gilpin's photographs of the Indian ruins in the Southwest, features phallic-like towers, but they are punctuated with empty, dark windows and doorways, including one where a female model leans outward from a window in such a structure.

With regard to the structure of her narratives, Judith Frye recognizes a photographic aesthetic in Cather's work and likens the tension in her stories to "a series of photographs" because they are "discontinuous—separate moments, with increasingly greater spaces between them" (226). The structure of *The Professor's House* is a perfect example of this discontinuity as it is constituted in three separate parts, with Tom Outland's story dividing St. Peter's. Cather's narrative structure in *My Ántonia* also demonstrates the quality of discontinuousness Frye identifies, allowing the novel to be read like (though it is not analogous with) a photographic album of sorts that collects and orders images. The narrative itself assumes a photographic aesthetic as it is framed by a conversation between two characters who claim to know Ántonia. One of them is an unnamed character, and the other is Jim Burden, who then assumes the role of the narrator in the main portion of the novel. It is within this framework that Cather lays the groundwork whereby she establishes Ántonia as a woman of the soil.

The unnamed frame narrator and Jim discuss their mutual acquaintance with Ántonia, her image evoked by the Iowa plains they are traveling across by train: "this girl seemed to mean to us the country" and "to speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places" (*My Ántonia* 5). Together, they are compelled to each "get a picture of her," or to recreate her identity from their memories of her. Inside this frame, the core narrative begins with Jim first hearing about Ántonia as a boy while he is crossing that "great midland plain of North America" (9) by train to live with his grandparents. After young Jim first meets Ántonia, she is repeatedly superimposed against the prairie as "[a]lmost every day she came running across the prairie" (28) to have a reading lesson with him, melding her identity with the land. Even the home where young Ántonia lives

is a space dug out of the earth, so she literally lives *in* the land. The rest of the narrative is replete with images of *Ántonia* as part of that spacious plane. Cather presents most of these images through the filter of Jim's romanticized observations of *Ántonia*. At times, Jim's inclination to equate women with the land approaches eroticism, as in the way he describes *Ántonia* out working in the fields, "from sunup to sundown...coming up the furrow...sunburned, sweaty, her dress open at the neck, and her throat and chest dust-plastered," very much a woman of the soil who he claimed was "too proud of her strength" (96). In spite of this, Cather tucks in details that countermand Jim's romantic, but also judgmental, view of *Ántonia* by emphasizing how *Ántonia* constructs her own identity as a woman of the soil, a woman who is indeed proud of her strength from working on the land and the way it shapes her body. Cather contrasts *Ántonia*'s pride in her work with Jim's disapproval that such work makes her "rough" and the butt of nasty jokes by "farmhands across the country" while *Ántonia* takes pleasure in describing "how much she could lift and endure" (96), constantly juxtaposing Jim's pictures of her with the identity *Ántonia* draws from the land. Cather's use of a gendered, photographic aesthetic undergirds nearly every aspect of this novel of the soil, where Cather gives *Ántonia*, as she does with other female characters, the last word on how they define themselves.

The closing frame is included, not at the end of the core narrative, but in the end of Cather's introduction to the novel. While the core narrative ends with Jim waiting to get on a train, repeating the train trope in the introduction, Cather also has Jim admit that though he and *Ántonia* share a past, her life has become "a rich mine of life" and that "the strong things of her heart came out in her body," a body he had once desired and

also distained. This cements *Ántonia*'s identity as a woman of the soil, particularly when Jim then links her to "the founders of early races" (259), which also tacitly links her to the ancient races of the cliff dwellers in *The Song of the Lark* and *The Professor's House*. In comparison, Jim then bemoans "what a little circle man's [one can assume Jim's] experience is" (272). Jim repeats this sentiment in the outer frame by appearing at the unnamed character's apartment months after having produced only an unordered, "bulging legal portfolio" analogous to *Ántonia*'s box of photographs. This portfolio, "that hasn't any form" (6) demonstrates what Frye refers to as "discontinuous—separate moments" like a "series of photographs" that become the basis for the framed core narrative. Most importantly, while Cather appropriates a masculine voice to tell *Ántonia*'s story, her use of a gendered photographic aesthetic in this way allows *Ántonia*'s story, a story that may have been lost in the "little circle [of] man's experience," to transcend the frame.

In addition to the use of a photographic aesthetic in the framing techniques which order narrative structure in *The Professor's House* and *My Ántonia*, Cather also uses photographic language and photographic references to highlight pivotal moments in *The Song of the Lark* and *The Professor's House* as she does in *My Ántonia*. In *The Song of the Lark*, there are two moments in particular when Thea is studying music in Chicago, and the third moment involving her experience in Panther Canyon, all of which are influenced by a gendered photographic aesthetic communicated through photographic language and imagery. The first moment is when Thea responds to Jules Breton's painting, "The Song of the Lark," the second occurs while she is listening to a symphony concert. The third moment is arguably an important pivotal point in the novel—Thea's

transformation in Panther Canyon. In *The Professor's House*, even though Tom's photographs of Blue Mesa are a key element in the narrative, Cather salts some photographic references and language in St. Peter's story as well.

Early in *The Professor's House*, Cather presents St. Peter in his attic study musing over childhood memories, and he describes his experiences as having "made pictures in him when he was unwilling and unconscious, when his eyes were merely open wide" (21). Describing the photographic process here, Cather's choice of language evokes the image of a camera with regard to memories, with St. Peter's wide-open eyes functioning like a camera shutter. Those memories are fixed in him like light imprinting images on film or a photographic plate. This reference also anticipates the actual photos Tom Outland will produce that will represent the memory of an ancient culture and the loss of his artifacts. However, one of the more curious photographic references Cather includes in St. Peter's story is his creation of the tableau.

A tableau, or tableau vivant, is defined as a "living picture." This means that costumed human models would be assembled and posed in a still composition that would represent or recreate a scene from painting, literature, history, or represent an allegory from the Bible. Meant to entertain or instruct, a tableau constitutes a living, breathing mimesis. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the tableau became a popular subject for Pictorialist photographers like Gertrude Käsebier, though photographers after Käsebier and other Pictorialists would move away from this kind of composition in favor of more modernist photography like Gilpin's later work. St. Peter's tableau, which could have been an actual tableau vivant or a photograph of a tableau, features his sons-in-law costumed as historical figures and posed inside a tent as St. Peter says he was asked by



students who were planning a historical pageant “to do a picture for them” (59). The picture St. Peter creates is meant to be a joke, but “his picture” (60) isn’t appreciated by anyone but himself. It can be argued that this “picture” was photographed as it would be uncomfortable for two men to hold the poses St. Peter describes for any length of time, and also because this was a popular subject for photographers at that time.

One critic has argued that Cather used tableaux “to advance a critique of modern commodity culture akin to Walter Benjamin” (Prenatt 205), but an examination of her use of fictional photographs, like the reference to the portrait of *Ántonia*’s child, and her use of a photographic aesthetic, proves she was not convinced, like Benjamin,<sup>5</sup> that technical reproduction of people or art through photography serves to encourage self-alienation (Benjamin 32), particularly as Cather uses photographs to create identity or to preserve a record of history, as in *Ántonia*’s family photo album. However, Cather does agree with Benjamin that art is rooted in religion, although Benjamin maintains that prehistoric art is rooted in “magical practices” (26). At the very least, ancient art, like the vessels in *Blue Mesa*, are objects of art created through or connected to mysticism or ritual. St. Peter articulates this himself in one of his lectures where he declares that with regard to art and religion, “they are the same thing, in the end, of course” (*The Professor’s House* 55).

Cather has articulated this same sentiment earlier in *The Song of the Lark* through Thea’s experience in Panther Canyon. But long before Thea enters the canyon, Cather employs a photographic aesthetic and photographic language in several pivotal moments in the novel. The first two moments are textually back-to-back in the narrative, although weeks intervene between them. The first moment occurs when Thea goes to visit Chicago’s Art Institute. While there, one painting in particular captures her attention in

an unexpected way, Jules Breton's *The Song of the Lark*, from which Cather chose the title of her novel. There is something about Breton's painting that has an awakening effect on Thea. More than any other work in Chicago's Art Institute, she claims this image of a young farm girl standing in a field at dawn as hers. There is something about "the flat country, the early morning light, the wet fields, the look in the girl's heavy face—well, they were all hers" (182). This image is interesting for several reasons. First, Thea never refers to this image as a painting, but always a "picture," perhaps because of its photo-like realism. Secondly, Breton's painting style could be considered photographic in the way he uses light and realistic detail. Further, Breton's biographer, Annette Bourrut Lacouture, states that he, like several of his contemporary artists, used the mimetic qualities of photographs to produce painted compositions, claiming that "many artists, including the greatest, used the technique of photography" (34). Breton himself would become a photographer later in his life. Further, the image of the farm girl standing in a field holding a sickle is an image Cather duplicates and inserts into *My Ántonia* when she describes the character of Lena Lingard with her "curved reaping-hook in her hand...flushed like the dawn" (*My Ántonia* 168, 169) into the head of a dreaming Jim Burden.

The second pivotal moment occurs in the narrative directly following Thea's picture revelation at the Art Institute even though weeks go by in Thea's life before this second moment occurs. In this instant, Thea is listening to a symphonic concert. At first, she can't really hear the music and pays more attention observing the musicians and their instruments. Thea tries to encourage herself to truly listen but says her "mind was like a glass that is hard to focus" (*Song of the Lark* 184), comparing Thea's mind to a camera

lens. This seems like an odd image to use in reference to listening, but it points to Thea's efforts to capture and understand this moment as a camera lens does. Immediately after this, the orchestra began to play Dvorak's Symphony in E Minor, "called on the programme, 'From the New World.'" For Thea, this music from the new world offers not just a new way of listening, but also a new way of seeing. When this music began playing, Thea's lens-like mind "became clear" (184). This is a pivotal as it marks the moment when Thea becomes able to experience and to access the ecstasy of the mature artist, which also marks her transition from a child to a woman pressing "her hands upon her heaving bosom, that was a little girl's no longer" (186). However, it is not until Thea's experience in the light-filled Panther Canyon that her identity as a woman artist would fully develop.

While Thea's mind-lens first becomes clear listening to the music of a new world, it is an ancient world that would truly teach her to see and to connect to the lineage of the women artists who once occupied the cliff dwellings in Panther Canyon. Thea admits that "a great deal escaped her eye as she passed through the world" (276), but the time she spends in this ancient place renews all of her senses. Here, Cather presents the land as an enclosing, nurturing space while she presents the revelation that comes to Thea in photographic language as she bathes in a "glittering thread of current" as the key to her maturity as an artist. This revelation occurs as a flash through Thea's mind: "what was any art but an effort to make a sheath...in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself" a moment "caught in a flash of arrested motion" (279). While Thea connects this arrested moment to a sculpture she saw at the Chicago Art Institute, what Cather describes here could also be the description of creating a

photograph—film exposed to a flash of light captures a moment in life, which anticipates the photographs Tom would take of Blue Mesa. For Thea, and Cather, this revelation allows her to embody her identity as a woman artist by making the connection between the artistry of the Indian pottery vessels left behind in the cliff dwellings, pots made by women, thereby inventing her own usable past. Thea sees herself as a light-filled vessel of sound. It can be argued that cameras are also vessels meant to hold light. To this end, this revelation also produced a brightness in Thea “like the brightness which came over the underbrush after a shower” (281). Ultimately, this photographic flash of revelation is what gives Thea the determination to step confidently outside the gender norm. This is a norm Cather describes as requiring women to “meekly draw the plough under the rod of parental guidance,” a norm that “did not in the least care what became of one, so long as one did not misbehave” (282) by eschewing the roles of wife and mother in order to become an artist.

In all of these moments in both *My Ántonia* and *The Song of the Lark*, Cather’s use of a gendered photographic aesthetic in implementing photographic language or including fictional photographs, provides a way for her to establish the identities of her female characters as artists and/or women of the soil, and to question the gender norms of the early twentieth century. She accomplishes this through the male characters in *The Professor’s House*, whose relationships hint at intimacies that venture outside gender norms, or what she describes in “The Novel Demeublé” as the “thing not named” (*Not Under Forty* 50). Even while her relationship with gender remains something of an enigma, it is clear that a gendered photographic aesthetic is instrumental in the novels discussed here.

Laura Gilpin never articulated a specific gendered aesthetic in her writing, and when interviewed by Gloria Steinem in 1974 for *Ms. Magazine* much later in her life, she was asked what she thought of women's lib. Gilpin was unaware of who Steinem was and responded, "I don't think about it at all" (Sandweiss, quoted in *An Enduring Grace* 111). She maintained that while photographs are "either good, bad, or mediocre...you can't tell the sex of the photographer by the photograph" (quoted in Rosenblum 10). Yet, her achievements as one of the first women landscape photographers remain underappreciated. In her chapter on Gilpin in *The Dessert Is No Lady*, Sandweiss states: "No other woman in the history of American photography so devoted herself to chronicling the landscape" (62). And while she admits it's "difficult to draw conclusions about a 'feminine' way of seeing from the work of one woman, who persevered in a field traditionally dominated by men," Gilpin's body of work differs from the work of her male contemporaries because she "was interested in the land as an environment that shaped human activity" (63) and not as a place to be conquered or civilized. To that end, Gilpin felt her own photos of the Southwest would better represent the southwestern landscape in *The Professor's House* than the fictional photos produced by the character, Tom Outland, because Gilpin felt "Cather's feelings about Mesa Verde [a model for Blue Mesa] were probably similar to her own" (Sandweiss, *An Enduring Grace* 44). In addition, like Käsebier, Gilpin's intent was to photograph the land and to capture its spirit in the same way she and Käsebier tried to capture the spirit of the person in their portraiture, the same way Cather captured the spirit of the land on the page. This could be why Gilpin proposed the collaboration between herself and Cather, where her photos would accompany a special edition of *The Professor's House*. Unlike Tom Outland,

Gilpin was in a unique position to photograph living Native Americans as well. Although she didn't articulate a gendered aesthetic of her own, she was inspired by Käsebier's gendered aesthetic in the way she formed connections with her subjects, in the way she wove a network of connections with other women artists, and in the way she eventually produced many collections of her own images with their accompanying text after establishing Gilpin Publishing Company in 1925. Notably, the title of one of her later collections resists Curtis's depiction of Native Americans as vanishing by giving it the title, *The Enduring Navaho*.

As stated previously, Gilpin produced books of her images and text long before the appearance of *The Enduring Navaho*, including a collection of her photographs of Mesa Verde that were never included in an edition of *The Professor's House*. Scholars like Goldberg, Hutchinson, and Gilpin's own biographer criticize her texts for being overly romantic, particularly in her descriptions of Native Americans. For example, in *The Pueblos*, which was published in 1941, she writes, "In many ways, the Indians are a simple and childlike people" but then she admits, "in other ways, they are exceedingly difficult to understand" (86). So, while at first, she appears to be maintaining a stereotype of Native Americans held by white, Anglo culture (an accusation levied by critics of Käsebier), she also indicates the Indians she photographed are much more complex. She admits, too, that some of her initial photographs of Native Americans were posed, and that she leaned heavily on a Pictorialist soft focus, which leant an overly romantic rendering of her Indian subjects for which she expressed regret later in her career, as in the preface to *The Pueblos*, published in 1941. This volume contains photographs she took over twenty years during which her photography showed "successive stages of

photographic change” that she hoped demonstrated progress (5). Her romantic depiction of the land in her early work, like *Mesa Verde National Park*, however, is resonant with Cather’s depiction of the land in her novels. And in spite of the unrealized collaboration between Cather and Gilpin, the impulse indicates the profound influence Cather had on Gilpin who captured worlds of the soil in photos while Cather created them on the page.

While Gilpin didn’t establish articulate a formal photographic gendered aesthetic in writing, she did initially share that same Pictorialist approach, like Gertrude Käsebier, when creating her images, using a soft focus. She also shared Cather’s preference for uncluttered compositions that leaned toward Modernist design. Käsebier was a mentor and a role model for Gilpin, whose portrait Käsebier made in 1905 when Gilpin was fourteen. Sandweiss maintains that being photographed at that young age by “the foremost woman photographer of the day left a deep impression on Laura” and that Gilpin would later reach out to Käsebier when she decided to study photography (Sandweiss 16), after which Käsebier would become a lifelong supporter of her work. Like Käsebier, portrait photography would also become her way of making a living. As mentioned before, she shared Käsebier’s philosophy of portraiture in that she, too, “tried to evoke the essential spirit of her sitters” (35), a sentiment that would carry through when she began photographing the landscapes for which she is now known and, later, the Native Americans who lived in the American Southwest. Gilpin connected with the land as she would with a “sitter,” treating the land as a photographic subject in much the same way Cather presented the land as a character in her novels.

In addition, like Käsebier, Gilpin benefited from her connections with other women artists when she moved to New York in October of 1916 to study at the Clarence

H. White School of Photography at Käsebier's recommendation. Photographer, Clarence White, established this school to counter Stieglitz's mandate that true artistic photography could never be commercial. Most of White's students were aspiring women artists like Gilpin, who needed to learn both the aesthetics of art and to be able to apply them in a commercial way in order to support themselves or their families. One of Gilpin's roommates and fellow student, Brenda Putnam, was a sculptor who understood the difficulties in becoming a female artist. Sandweiss quotes a letter from Putnam to Gilpin in 1916 where Putnam echoes the sentiments expressed by previous women artists, like Mary Carnell, when she states "women are not accepted by men as apprentices. Women get in the way! So we must teach ourselves" (24). While still at the White school, Gilpin would also attend a presentation by another successful woman photographer who had studied there, Doris Ulmann, whose work is discussed in a later chapter. Ultimately, while Gilpin perfected her craft at the White school, incorporating the basic elements of Pictorialism combined into her work, she was also "experimenting with a different way of seeing" (32) that would eventually lead her toward the style she used in creating her landscapes.

Even though Gilpin proposed this collaboration with Cather inspired by *The Professor's House*, Cather's *The Song of the Lark* was the second of her novels of the soil that could have also inspired Gilpin, particularly since the main character, Thea, grows up in a small town in Colorado, as did Gilpin. For fictional Thea and *Ántonia*, for Gilpin, for Gilpin's mentor, Gertrude Käsebier, and for Cather herself, a connection to the soil helped them forge their identities. For Gilpin and Cather, it also helped them form their identities as women artists, particularly since the land is a powerful presence in both



photographs and texts. As discussed previously, women's identities as artists are also fortified by a connection to the lineage of indigenous female artists that once inhabited the land through which they are all linked.

Cather described her first response to the landscape of the Nebraska prairie as a negative one. In her interview with the *Philadelphia Record* in 1913, Cather describes her first encounter with the Nebraska prairie when she was a child: "The land was open range and there was almost no fencing...I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality." Later, once she developed a relationship with the land, she states, "I would not know how much a child's life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it" (*Willa Cather in Person* 10). However, she did eventually realize the land's effects on herself as a child by showing how the land was bound up in the lives of her young characters like Thea and Antonia. The land worked against that initial feeling of erasure, imbuing those characters with strength and vibrancy and help them to construct their identities as women, and in Thea's case, her identity as an artist.

Cather begins *The Song of the Lark* with an epigraph from Lenau's *Don Juan*: "It was a wondrous lovely storm that drove me!" This sets the stage for the image of Thea, whose sand hills outside her Colorado desert town that rose out of the white sandy plains surrounding town "were a constant tantalization; she loved them better than anything near Moonstone" (51). In another instance where the land makes a distinct impression on Thea, she and her father have traveled to Laramie, Wyoming where an old rancher took them to see the Laramie Plain, "a great flat plain, strewn with white boulders, with the wind howling over it." There, Cather captures Thea's enraptured reaction to this plain as

she “ran about among the white stones, her skirts blowing this way and that” so moved “that the wind brought to her eyes tears that might have come anyway” (60). Thea recalls this memory while on a picnic in her beloved sand hills, her body nestled in the warm sand, which evokes a sense of the land as feminine in its ability to cradle a young girl. Possibly inspired by the image of Thea on a windswept plain, Gilpin created a similar image in her photograph “The Prairie,” one of her first landscapes produced in 1917, two years after the publication of *The Song of the Lark*, and a year before the appearance of *My Ántonia* in 1918. Even though Gilpin’s image of a Colorado Prairie was originally created to illustrate a poem, “On the Prairie” by Eliza M. Swift, published in *Scribners Magazine* in 1918, this poem also captures the essence of Cather’s epigraph at the beginning of *The Song of the Lark*. “On the Prairie” is a poem about spiritual freedom that also expresses the exhilaration Cather’s Thea feels on the Laramie Plain: “Oh, the voice of the prairie—/ How often I hear it! / It calls to my spirit” (reproduced in Pitts, n.p.). However, according to Emily Ballew Neff, Gilpin’s image accomplishes more. Whether this was her intent or not, “Gilpin offers an alternative to Remington’s masculine heroics performed on the desert prairie...by substitut[ing] a fully sensate woman absorbing the physicality of the landscape” (91).<sup>6</sup> In addition, unlike most landscapes created by her male contemporaries, this vastness is organized around a female figure who directs the gaze of the viewer. No shrinking violet on a windswept plain, the image easily evokes Cather’s open range, but rather than the landscape creating a diminishing effect, Gilpin’s figure, like Cather’s women of the soil, stands strongly erect upon the land, even while “a wond’rous lovely storm” (*Song of the Lark*, epigraph by Lenau) blows her skirt forward into that great expanse of negative space to the right of



Fig. 15 *The Prairie*, 1917, ca. 1979 Amon Carter Museum of American Art

the figure. Her white frock and vertical position, rendered with the traditional Pictorialist soft focus and a modernist sense of design with regard to its uncluttered composition, create a strong contrast to the dark horizon and varied tonality of the sky. Here, Gilpin creates a visual grammar that communicates a female strength of spirit by depicting a woman who is firmly planted on the land. Conversely, it's also possible Cather may have been influenced by this image of Gilpin's when she began writing her character *Ántonia*, particularly because the reader's first picture of *Ántonia*, as presented by Jim Burden, is of a girl who takes his hand "coaxingly" (*My Ántonia* 25) as they run up a "steep drawside" on the land, stopping when they come to a ravine. It is there that *Ántonia* appears much like the figure in Gilpin's photograph. Burden, *Ántonia*, and her young sister stand on the edge of that ravine with a great expanse of space before them while "the wind was so strong...the girls' skirts were blown out before them" as is the female figure's skirt in Gilpin's photo. And just as the figure in Gilpin's photo maintains a strong, spirited stance in spite of that wind, so *Ántonia* "seemed to like it" (25).

In addition to the prairie images Gilpin and Cather present in photographs and in text, it's useful to consider Gilpin's images of Mesa Verde next to Cather's descriptions of Blue Mesa, considering how these ancient dwellings had a profound effect on both photographer and writer. Cather provides two descriptions from the inside of cliff dwellers' villages, one in *The Song of the Lark* in Panther Canyon, and another more detailed description of the village in Blue Mesa in *The Professor's House*. In both novels, Cather treats these cliff dwellings as sacred places. Now in ruins, they retain the capacity to profoundly affect the lives of both characters. In *The Song of the Lark*, Thea describes the "dead city" she sees nestled inside what looked like "a great fold in the rock...houses stood along in a row, like the buildings in a city block, or like a barracks." Here, the land is described in a way that evokes female anatomy as in the "great fold" of rock that shelters the ruins. In the photograph that Gilpin took of Spruce Tree House in Mesa Verde in 1927, she has captured the barracks-like configuration of dwellings Cather describes as being nestled under the "overhanging cliff" that made a "roof two hundred feet thick" (*Song of the Lark* 273). When Tom describes the cliff dwellings in Blue Mesa, they are not a "dead city" but a little city of stone, asleep...as still as sculpture" (*The Professor's House* 179), that sculptural quality is clear in Gilpin's images, those "little houses of stone nestling close to one another...and in the middle of the group a round tower," which was "a fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something" (180). Tom insists, too, that this tower is unlike any he's ever seen before and that it "marks a difference." This difference marks the cliff-dwelling civilization's dogged determination to not just survive but to thrive in in such a way that after they are gone, the place they leave behind is rendered a holy place. This tower, then,



Fig. 16 *Spruce Tree House*, Mesa Verde, 1927  
ca. 1979 Amon Carter Museum of American Art

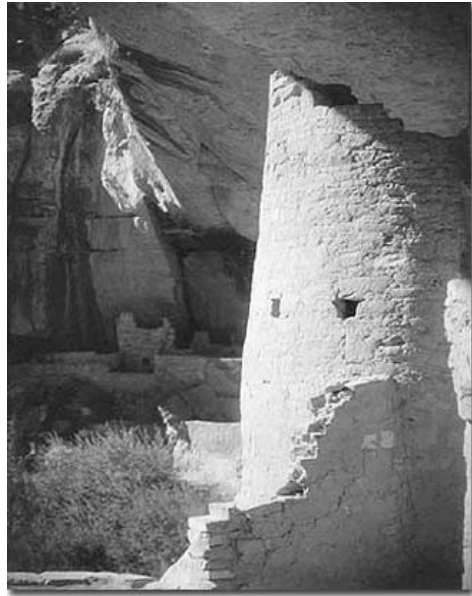


Fig. 17 *Round Tree House*, Mesa Verde, 1925  
ca. 1979 Amon Carter Museum of American Art

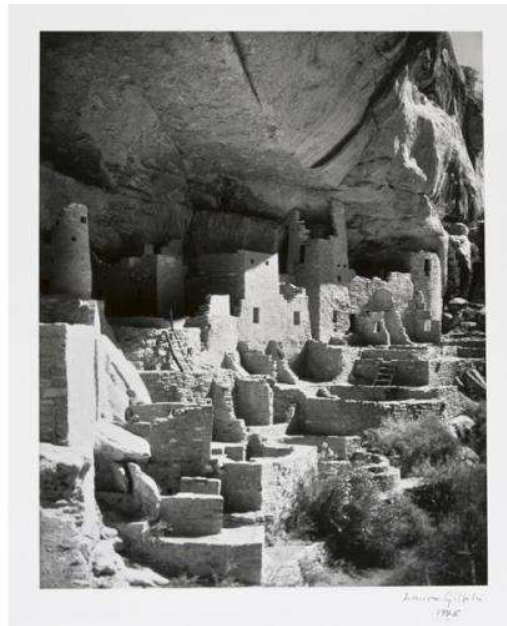


Fig. 18 *Cliff House*, Mesa Verde, 1925  
ca. 1979 Amon Carter Museum of American Art

serves as a monument not to their extinction, but to their artistry and their endurance as part of history, even though all that is left of them is the empty dwellings and artifacts they left behind. This figure reminds the reader that Tom, too, is a tower-like ghost within the structure of the novel whose memory is a holy place for St. Peter. Tom also leaves a creation behind, the Outland Engine that, while it is no tower, is also a triumph of engineering that he leaves behind. He and his story command the narrative at its center like the tower commands the jumble of houses. Cather emphasizes the importance of this image by projecting it onto Tom's brain as "clear as a picture" that he can see in the dark "like a magic lantern slide" (182). Here, again, Cather evokes a photographic reference to underscore Tom's experience on Blue Mesa as a magic lantern (an image projector developed in the seventeenth century that used glass slides to project images to entertain an audience) using lenses and a light source. In Gilpin's photograph of Round Tree House tower in Mesa Verde, she frames this structure so that it dominates the composition like it does in Tom's imagination, yet the tower is contained by the maternal folds of rock that cradle the village. It stands silently, a pale ghost with dark, empty eye sockets that, like the tower on Blue Mesa, seems to look "down into the canyon with the calmness of eternity" (180).

There are many other analyses of Tom's tower in the same gendered vein of the analysis of the plough on the plain in *My Antonia*. On one hand, it's difficult to argue against viewing this tower as anything but a phallic image in the way Cather describes it, an image that brings into question Tom's sexuality and his relationship with the Professor, but the tower and the cliff dwellings themselves can also be considered to be vacuoles as described previously by Middleton. When Tom declares that the tower makes

“the jumble of houses...mean something,” that meaning is not readily apparent, not even to Tom. The tower is, physically and metaphorically, an empty space uniting other empty spaces, spaces that each reader must fill with his or her own meaning. Davidov, however, revisits Gilpin’s framing of the tower. She claims that the tower was “no masculine symbol in Gilpin’s vision” precisely because “the tower is stopped in its upward progress by the curve of the cliff from which it is built: it takes on the roundness of a vessel, whose purpose is to shelter” (Davidov 112), evoking the images of Thea’s vessels in *The Song of the Lark*. Further, there are multiple gazes here. Those windows, like eyes, gaze into the viewer as much as the viewer, and the photographer, gaze into those windows. This emphasizes, as Karen Hust asserts, a “beholding eye [that] is one point in a larger web of relationships and cannot be considered transcendent or objective; representation here does not banish the object but rather inaugurates intersubjectivity” (32) which then “locates subjectivity within feminine consciousness” (Davidov 113). This may not have been Cather’s intent, but it is clear that Gilpin utilizes a gendered photographic aesthetic to establish an intersubjectivity within a feminine consciousness in the way she depicts this tower, which is one of the most important images in the text, and offers viewers a new way of seeing it.

Cather seems to have had her own epiphany upon spending time in Mesa Verde in 1915 and Tom’s passionate connection to Blue Mesa hints at that, but Cather leaves her epiphany unnamed. However, what Tom’s photographs and his mental magic lantern images, and even the tower, do accomplish is that they embody the act of memory. And to that end, Cather has used a photographic aesthetic to present acts of memory as camera flashes that make pictures, as they do in the Professor, as they do in Tom’s mind, and

apparently, as they have done in Cather. In Cather's review "Defoe's The Fortunate Mistress" in *Willa Cather On Writing*, she produces a statement of her own photographic aesthetic with regard to memory:

When we have a vivid experience in social intercourse, pleasant or unpleasant, it records itself in our memory in the form of a scene; and when it flashes back to us, all sorts of apparently unimportant details are flashed back with it. When a writer has a strong or revelatory experience with his characters, he unconsciously creates a scene, gets a depth of picture, and writes, as it were, in three dimensions instead of two. (79, 80)

The tower, the sculptural quality of the cliff dwellings, can then be considered Cather writing in the third dimension. Her own visit to Mesa Verde provided the vivid experience that she drew on to create *Blue Mesa*, particularly as she and her travel companion, Edith Lewis, got lost while visiting "an unexcavated cliff-village, The Tower House" (Lee 231). The two had to spend the night there before being rescued, and according to Lee, the experience made "a profound impression on Cather" (232). In a letter Cather wrote to Elizabeth Shepley in 1915, she describes Mesa Verde as having made her joyful, "joyful because Mesa Verde exists" (*Selected Letters* 210) even though the place mauled her with "its big brutality." In this same letter she says she "got a lot of glorious photographs in the Southwest—most of them belong to the President of the Denver & Rio Grande" and that they are "the pick of hundreds of attempts; in that light, and before such heights and depths the camera becomes inarticulate—it stutters and raves" (209), a sentiment Tom articulates about his photographs not being able to capture



the grandeur of Blue Mesa. Cather goes on to say that only a painter could capture such a place, or that any photographs taken of the place must be in color.

Though Gilpin's photographs are not in color, they do depict the three-dimensional quality of the cliff dwellings, including the Tower House cliff-village that made an indelible impression on Cather. Gilpin did not visit Mesa Verde until she accompanied two friends on a camping trip through the Southwest in the Fall of 1924, so her photographs were created before *The Professor's House* was published in 1925. According to Sandweiss, these ancient cliff structures made as much of an impression on Gilpin as they did on Cather, and she worked hard to utilize the strong southwestern light that allowed her to present them as sculptural forms (44). Further, Sandweiss points out that Gilpin went to great pains (getting up early to take pictures before any tourists arrived) to emphasize "the way buildings were built into caves high up cliff walls in order



Fig. 19 *Square Tower House*, Mesa Verde, 1925  
ca. 1979 Amon Carter Museum of American Art

to suggest the difficult and precarious nature of the cliff dwellers' lives" (44). This is a sentiment Cather has Father Duchene, the priest who interprets the cliff dwellers' village and artifacts for Tom, articulate: "Wherever humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality, is a sacred spot" (*The Professor's House* 199). Gilpin recognized that sacredness in the ancient dwellings themselves and in Cather's depiction of them. Even in black and white, Gilpin's images rave rather than stutter, though it's not known whether Cather ever had the opportunity to see or consider the Mesa Verde photos she proposed to contribute to an illustrated edition of *The Professor's House*.

Another area where Laura Gilpin's work and Cather's text also intersect in their mutual attraction to the Southwest, is in their treatment of Native Americans. As mentioned previously, Gilpin admits her early staged photographs of Native Americans appear overly romantic, but they were her introduction to the subject matter that would figure prominently later in her career when she spent time photographing the Navaho. Sandweiss claims, "As Laura became increasingly well informed about Indian affairs, these soft-focus pictures of Navaho actors posing in the supposed costumes of their would-be ancestors became a source of embarrassment" and that it wasn't only the style of the photo, but also that she "photographed the Indians purely as types without any regard for their individual character" (45). In her preface to *The Pueblos*, a collection of her photographs and text compiled over twenty years (published in 1941), Gilpin acknowledges that her early images from the 1920s have the Pictorialist "soft focus." However, she also says that her work has gone "through successive stages of photographic change and, I hope, progress" (5), which indicates her own dissatisfaction

with her initial approach to depicting Native Americans. Regardless, critics like Goldberg maintain that Gilpin's Mesa Verde photos and her accompanying text in the booklet she publishes in 1927 titled simply, *Mesa Verde National Park*, "is as much a fiction as *The Professor's House*; her genre, unlike Cather's there, is historical romance" (66).

However, it can be argued that Cather, also, employs historical romance in how she



Fig. 20 *House of the Cliff Dweller*, Mesa Verde, 1925  
Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas

exoticizes the Native American subject in the form of Mother Eve. This is not dissimilar to the way Gilpin makes "use of Native Americans posed as ancient cliff dwellers" to create a racialized, usable Indian past interpreted by whites, as opposed to allowing Native Americans to be represented as they are. Goldberg levels similar criticism at Cather as well for "being far more interested in dead Indians than living ones" (67), particularly in *The Song of the Lark* and *The Professor's House*.

For example, in the text accompanying Gilpin's image "House of the Cliff Dweller," included in her collection *The Pueblos*, Gilpin writes that in ancient times,

“some cliff dweller maiden may have leaned from this very window” (28). The bare-shouldered woman in the window is smiling, gazing dreamily off into the distance. While this image may present a romanticized version of an ancient Indian past re-enacted by present-day Indians, this image also represents an ancient woman of the soil with whom Gilpin and Cather gain agency as well as a usable past. Even though the only image of a Native American woman Cather produces in *The Professor's House* is a mummified woman, Mother Eve, she is not treated with romanticism. Rather, Tom treats her reverently even though she is a woman long dead, whose mouth is open “as if she were screaming, and her face, through all those years, had kept a look of terrible agony” (*The Professor's House* 192). She is not sleeping dreamily or peacefully, as she might have been described in more romanticized language. Tom treats her with reverence, explaining that “there is something stirring about finding evidences of human labour and care in the soil of an empty country” (173), and with regard to the site of the cliff dwellers, Father Duchene proclaims, “Wherever humanity has made that hardest of all starts and lifted itself out of mere brutality is a sacred spot” (199). This is a sentiment he hoped would be well-received in Washington D.C. in order to get support to preserve her and the artifacts that remain in the ruins. He hoped to preserve this site that is representative of a usable past, adopting the cliff-dweller culture as part of his personal history while understanding that even though this culture is extinct, it has a lot to teach contemporary American culture. No one, from Tom's Congressman to the director of the Smithsonian was interested in Tom's discovery of the site of the ancient cliff-dwellers. Virginia Ward, stenographer to the Smithsonian director, explained to Tom: “The don't care much about dead and gone Indians. What they do care about is going to Paris, and getting another

ribbon on their coats” (212). Through the Congressman, the Smithsonian director, and Virginia Ward, Cather indicts the white, industrial, commodity culture, the Babbity that Stocking mentions. Gilpin echoes Tom’s experience in Washington when she acknowledges that the government “was slow in recognizing the great educational and cultural value of these remains” found in the cliff dwellings, and like the fate of the artifacts Tom discovers, she expresses regret that many of these items were “excavated and removed, often destructively” by “foreign archaeologists, local ranchers, and commercial pot hunters” (*Pueblos* 28). Thus, Gilpin shared Tom’s grief over the loss of the cliff dweller’s artifacts. However, after his return from Washington, he has an experience alone in the Cliff City on Blue Mesa, a transformation much like Thea’s in Panther Canyon. In the midst of the cliff dwellers’ ruins, he connects with the land, the rocks which produced in him a kind of happiness that replaces his sense of loss: “Happiness is something one can’t explain. You must take my word for it. Troubles enough came afterward [after his summer spent in the Cliff City], but there was that summer, high and blue, a life in itself” a gift facilitated by the land which no one could plunder. Similarly, Gilpin describes in *The Pueblos*, the gift living Pueblo Indians, descendants of the cliff dwellers, continue to offer to American culture: “As artists they are aware of the great rhythm of nature and are keen observers of her forms. They have given us in their art a virility and beauty of design beside which much of our own becomes weak and somewhat insignificant” (124).

Eventually, Gilpin moved beyond the romanticism of an ancient Indian past, found in images of Native Americans posing as cliff dwellers (fig. 20). Instead, she would portray Native Americans, predominantly Navaho women (the Navaho are a

matriarchal culture), as complex individuals (fig. 23) with whom she developed relationships and a transcultural exchange, much like Käsebier did with her Indian portraits. Interestingly, Goldberg also points out that Cather's initial image of an Indian woman "draws attention to something that the text does not mention—that all but the last of the Mesa Verde inhabitants in [Gilpin's] *The Pueblos* are women" (69) leaving open the possibility of Gilpin's gendered identification (70) with Indian women, although the images beginning and ending of *The Pueblos* depict men. Even so, Goldberg reminds us, "Like Cather...Gilpin produces representations recognizably within a 'male' tradition" (74), even though those representations also resist that tradition (their women of the soil).

When Cather first mentions the Navaho in *The Song of the Lark*, her commentary on them, as opposed to the effusive fantasies Thea has of the ancient cliff dwellers, assumes a white, stereotypical view with regard to the identity and characteristics of this particular group of Native Americans. As Thea is being driven via wagon to the Ottenburg ranch in Arizona, she comments on the pine forest landscape of the Navahos, "the first great forest she had ever seen." The Navahos themselves, however, she describes as being "not much in the habit of giving or of asking help. Their language is not a communicative one, and they never attempt an interchange of personality in speech" (271). This is the only commentary about living Native Americans in the whole of the novel and seems out of place, except that perhaps this is not Thea speaking, but Cather articulating the larger, racialized cultural attitude toward Native Americans. Cather's visit to the Southwest in 1912 provided much of the material for *The Song of the Lark*, which was published in 1915. As mentioned previously, Gilpin positions herself similarly in her text in *The Pueblos* when she describes Indians as "simple and childlike

people” although she immediately allows for their complexity as well, implying that the difficulty in understanding them lies in the dominant culture’s stereotypical assumptions, assumptions she, herself, sheds when becomes more intimately involved with the Navahos and their culture. Cather’s attitude about the Navaho and Pueblo peoples also undergoes a shift by the time she writes *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

In 1930, the woman who would become Gilpin’s lifelong companion, Elizabeth (Betsy) Forster, and Laura went on a camping trip to see and photograph parts of the southwest including Canyon de Chelly and discovered the Navaho almost by chance. Sandweiss describes in her introduction to Betsy’s letters to Gilpin that at one point, their car ran out of fuel. Stranded, Gilpin “set off on foot in search of help or gasoline” (*Denizens of the Desert* 1). Gilpin reached a trading post, obtained some gas, and the trader’s wife drove her back to their car where she found Betsy surrounded by a group of Navaho whose “friendly concern...made a deep impression on them both” (2). A year later, Betsy moved to Red Rock, New Mexico when she was hired as a public health nurse for the Navaho community in Red Rock. When she packed her car and belongings, it included, according to Sandweiss, “a much-loved copy of Willa Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop*” (Sandweiss 53). It was through Betsy and her connections to the Navaho people, her intuitive understanding of them, and her involvement in the community beyond nursing, that allowed Gilpin the opportunity to get to know and to photograph members of this community in addition to the desert landscape. This marked the beginning of a much stronger gendered photographic aesthetic in Gilpin’s work as she began making her own connections with the Navaho people as individuals. She stopped paying models, like the woman in “House of the Cliff Dweller,” to pose as part of a

historical tableau, and instead “[s]he worked in a slow, deliberate, and collaborative manner with her Navaho subjects...[t]hus, she created a body of work that differs from her own previous work with the Pueblos as well as from most previous photography of the Navaho, because it is at once direct and honest, yet respectful and empathetic” (54). Many times, she would offer her subjects a print of their likeness in exchange. In addition, she wouldn’t make her subjects pose with props as in her early photography, nor would she take “snapshots without consent” (54). This is evident in the image of “Hardbelly’s Granddaughter” taken in 1933 that shows a young woman smiling directly into the camera lens while tenderly cradling a lamb as she sits comfortably cross-legged on the ground. This brings to mind the image Cather evokes in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* when the old Bishop’s memories of the Navaho are flashes (similar to St.



Fig. 21 *Hardbelly’s Granddaughter*, 1933  
©Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth, Texas

Peter’s photographic flashes of memory in *The Professor’s House*) that appear in his mind, like an image of the Navaho attending to their flocks during lambing season,



including the image of a “young Navaho woman, giving a lamb her breast until a ewe was found for it” (*Death Comes for the Archbishop* 295). Given Betsy’s well-loved copy of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Davidov describes Cather as being “a kind of touchstone for both Gilpin and Forster (111).

As further evidence that Gilpin’s depictions of the southwestern landscape were inspired by the descriptions of the land in Cather’s novel, in *The Pueblos*, she mentions Cather’s *Death Comes for the Archbishop* specifically and how Cather “graphically and beautifully tells the story of the padre’s life at Acoma” (120). Gilpin’s image “Big and Little Shiprock” also captures Cather’s description of “the flat...sea of sand” from which rose “great rock mesas, generally Gothic in outline, resembling vast cathedrals” (*Death*



Fig. 22 *Big and Little Shiprock, New Mexico, 1951*  
© 1979, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

*Comes for the Archbishop* 94). That Cather describes them as cathedrals is no accident as she later reveals that, like the cliff dwellings of Canyon de Chelly, a place Gilpin also

photographed, these stone monoliths are sacred places to the Navaho. As the Navaho character, Eusabio, tells the Bishop, “[t]he canyon and the Shiprock were like kind parents to his people, places more sacred to them than churches” (293). Gilpin’s composition of “Big and Little Shiprock” emphasizes their monolithic, sacred stature and provides another example of a landscape that places emphasis on an environment that shapes human activity and is not imposed on by human activity. This, too, is echoed in the Bishop’s observation of Eusabio’s relationship with the land: “Travelling with Eusabio was like travelling with the landscape made human” (232) because “it was the Indian’s way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave not trace” (233), which is how Gilpin chose to present her landscapes.

As seen in the Bishop’s response to Eusabio, Cather’s general treatment of the southwestern Native Americans in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, like Gilpin’s approach to photographing them, is much more complex. Unlike in her previous novels where she romanticizes the lost indigenous cultures, most of the Indians populating this narrative are alive, but their relationship to European culture is complicated by deceit and violence. While Tom in *The Professor’s House*, hunted only artifacts, Cather describes one character, Don Manuel Chavez, as having grown up going out hunting Navahos with other Mexican youths (183). In another case, a Catholic priest is credited for instigating a revolt of the Taos Indians. When the guilty Indians were sentenced to be hanged for the murder of white men, including the American governor, they appeal to Padre Martinez, who agrees to help save their lives, but only if they deed their land to him. Once in possession of Indian land, Padre Martinez left the Indians to be hanged as planned (139, 140). On the other hand, also unlike in her other novels, Cather gives

Native American characters s Eusabio and Jacinto a voice. Eusabio travels with the Bishop as a friend and equal, sharing his knowledge of the land with the priest. He also pays his respects to the dying Bishop in the end. The Bishop’s Indian guide, Jacinto describes his experience with white people, saying they “always put on a false face” and “there are many kinds of false faces; Father Vaillant’s, for example, was kindly but too vehement. The Bishop put on none at all...his face underwent no change” and to Jacinto, this was remarkable (93, 94). Finally, in the very end, Cather seems to agree with Gilpin when the Bishop declares “I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him” (296), that they will endure.

Perhaps the failed proposed collaboration with Cather led to what would eventually become a collaboration between Gilpin and her friend and companion, Elizabeth Forster, although *Denizens of the Desert* wouldn’t be published until long after Laura Gilpin published her book, *The Enduring Navaho* in 1968, which she dedicated to Forster. During Elizabeth’s time working as a nurse in Red Rock, Laura collected Elizabeth’s letters to her detailing her experiences among the Navaho. Laura encouraged



Fig. 23 *Navaho Woman, Child, and Lambs*, 1932  
© 1979, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

Forster to collect them into a book, and Laura would contribute her photographs of the Red Rock community. While the finished book drew initial interest from the publishers of Gilpin's *The Pueblos, Denizens of the Desert* would not be published until after Forster's death in 1972. Indeed, it wouldn't be published until after Gilpin's death in 1979 by her biographer, Martha Sandweiss. Still, this collaboration stands as an important example of how a gendered photographic aesthetic helped Gilpin create her intimate, iconic images of a group of people for whom a single white woman was "regarded with friendly, if wary, curiosity." Because of Elizabeth's friendships with the Navaho, "the trust [she] earned was generously extended to her friend" (3). Like Cather, Gilpin discovered her own women of the soil, but she developed the kind of personal relationships with them that is reflected in her portraits of them. Her images, particularly her later images, resist objectifying Native American subjects solely as an "other," and



Fig. 24 *Distant View of Shiprock*, Laura Gilpin, 1932  
© 1979, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

instead, there is an intersubjectivity, a traded gaze where those subjects look back at her as a friend. Gilpin's Navaho portraits provide an example of Haraway's "situated knowledge" that marks her gendered photographic aesthetic. While Haraway states, "Vision is *always* a question of the power to see" (192), and there is "no unmediated photograph" (190), it is possible to situate oneself with respect to one's subject where there is a shared conversation, a shared gaze, a web of connection as opposed to imposing a relativist romanticizing of non-white subjects, as Gilpin did initially. In her image, "Distant View of Shiprock," she nearly duplicates the composition she created in her early image "The Prairie." However, this time the viewer's gaze is directed by a Navaho woman in profile holding her child, appearing to lean upon a rock as she looks toward their sacred site, Shiprock. This is another example of a shared gaze between the viewer, the photographer, and the Navaho woman. More importantly, according to Hust, "Shiprock's spiritual significance for the Navaho—always important to Gilpin's vision of historical landscape—is invoked here as part of, but not superior to this woman's material life" (44). This is a further example of a gendered photographic aesthetic in Gilpin's visual grammar. In foregrounding an indigenous woman and child, Gilpin is subordinating the sacred phallic image in the distance, thereby ordering their importance within the greater natural landscape.

The Navahos taught Gilpin to see differently, but only because she was willing to form personal relationships with them, to adapt, and to learn. Toward the end of *The Enduring Navaho*, Gilpin describes a healing ceremony called "The Nightway," which, because of her personal relationship with the Navaho, she was granted permission to

attend and to photograph. Such an invitation contains all the solemnity and trust that Jacinto places in the Bishop in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* when he shows the Bishop his people's sacred cave. A line from one of the prayers in "The Nightway" seems to sum up Gilpin's career as a photographer more than any: "It is finished in beauty" (240). At the end of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather, too, celebrates what endures. As the Bishop lies upon his deathbed, he proclaims, "I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him" (296), Cather ends the novel with a reversal, presented with a gendered photographic aesthetic. Here, it is the white Bishop who dies while the Indians endure. One of the most striking, final images at the end of the book is a testament to that aesthetic, that of "a young Navaho woman, giving a[n orphaned] lamb her breast until a ewe was found for it," a selfless act that evokes the maternal image of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child as well as Gilpin's image of the young Navaho women cradling lambs as well as her own child (fig. 23). This is a memory that comes to the dying Bishop that she describes with photographic language, "scenes from those bygone times, dark and bright, flashed back" to him" (295).

Through the Navaho's connection with the land and Gilpin's willingness to form personal relationships with them, the Navaho taught Gilpin a new way of seeing. Cather indicates she has had a similar experience in her depiction of the dying Bishop, indicating that perhaps the Southwestern Native Americans and the land they lived upon taught Cather a new way of seeing as well. This new way of seeing for both Cather and Gilpin emerged from within the space of what connected them, their mutual interest in and respect for the land of the Southwest and the Native American cultures both ancient and living who have lived and continue to live upon it.

### Chapter 3

#### **“That Deadly Female Accuracy of Vision”: Katherine Anne Porter and Tina Modotti in Mexico**

In the web of connections that constitutes one of the elements of a gendered photographic aesthetic, Katherine Anne Porter admits a connection with Willa Cather. Cather’s work had an influence on her, but like Laura Gilpin, she never met Cather. Porter’s admiration for Cather is evident in an essay written in 1952, “Reflections on Willa Cather.” Here, Porter describes how Cather’s novels and short stories informed her early life, and that Cather remains, for her, “a kind of lighthouse, or even a promontory, some changeless phenomenon of art or nature or both” (*The Collected Essays* 35). Further, Porter describes a photographic portrait of Cather that was imprinted on her imagination: “I remember only one photograph—Steichen’s—made in middle life, showing a plain smiling woman, her arms crossed easily over a girl scout sort of white blouse, with a ragged part in her hair” (29). The photo Porter mentions (fig. 12) by Edward Steichen, depicts someone who, for Porter, looked least like a literary genius, though Porter lauded her as a “curiously immovable shape, monumental, virtue itself in her art and a symbol of virtue” (38, 39). Cather remains a genius whose works live in Porter’s mind “with morning freshness” because of “their clearness, warmth of feeling, calmness of intelligence, an ample human view of things; in short the sense of an artist at work in whom one could have complete confidence” (35). This description demonstrates how Cather may have inspired Porter’s application of a gendered photographic aesthetic by using photographic language and references to fictional photographs in her own novels and stories. Porter and photographer Tina Modotti (there is no connection between

Cather and Modotti) also shared Cather's "ample human view of things" in the way they both applied a gendered photographic aesthetic to create textual and photographic "human documents" in the way they portray and claim agency through their indigenous subjects. While Jewett's "human documents" focused on illustrious American white men, they focused on indigenous Mexicans and the working poor, whose faces reveal "the history not only of the man, but of humanity itself (Jewett, *Human Documents Portraits and Biographies of Eminent Men* vi) and whose faces, depicted in photographs and in text, would contribute to the cultural remaking of the Mexican nation. Their work communicated the kind of empathy that informs the creation of human documents, though they applied that aesthetic in ways that differed from both Cather and Gilpin. The way they applied that aesthetic also differed from each other as their work was situated within the charged political climate of post-revolutionary Mexico in the 1920s, which is where they both began their careers as artists.

Just as Cather and Gilpin were connected by their mutual interest in the American Southwestern landscape and its indigenous population, Porter's early writing and Modotti's work connected them through their depictions of indigenous subjects south of the border in Mexico. For Cather, applying a gendered photographic aesthetic provided a tool with which to create narrative spaces that pushed against social gender norms consigning women's art and fiction to the margins. Porter applied a similar use of that aesthetic, and just as Cather did, Porter used photographic language and references to fictional photographs within her narratives to push against those same gender norms, but from outside American culture. Porter also gained agency through her treatment of her non-white subjects, but where Porter's use of a photographic aesthetic differs from



Cather's is with regard to geography, with politics, and with Porter's level of engagement with the people who inspired her writing. Cather began as a regionalist writer of the Great Plains (*My Ántonia*) and later gathered her inspiration from visits to the American Southwest before she returned home to write (*The Professor's House*, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*). Porter, on the other hand, moved beyond Cather by physically relocating herself across a national boundary into the geography and culture where her Mexican subjects resided, living and working among them, even working to help improve their lives. In a conversation with Archer Winsten in 1937, Porter explained that she fled the "confining society" of her native Texas because she feared being "regarded as a freak," as "that's how they regarded a woman who tried to write" (reprinted in *Katherine Anne Porter Conversations*, edited by Givner 10). She eschewed anyone and anything that hampered her "mental freedom" (12). The cultural renaissance in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution provided the opportune time and the place where she could exercise that "mental freedom," and this is where Porter began her writing career and created her identity as a writer. Unlike Cather, Porter began writing about a region outside the United States, bringing attention to Mexican art and culture for the benefit of her American readership, who knew little about its southern neighbor apart from stereotypes.

Just as Porter crossed a national boundary to find mental freedom, freedom from American gender norms, and freedom to engage with the landscape and culture of Mexico, Modotti made the journey to Mexico from California, though for different reasons. Modotti made her first trip to Mexico in 1922, inspired by the letters of her husband, Robo, who had already moved there and claimed "he had finally found the place where he felt completely at ease as an artist" (Hooks 66). On her way there, she

was informed he had died suddenly in a Mexico City hospital. After burying him and then attending to an art exhibition he had organized, she returned to California. On her second trip to Mexico in 1923 with Weston (with whom she was having an affair at the time of Robo's death), she came with the intent to establish herself as a photographer. Weston agreed to teach her how to use a camera, the instrument with which she approached her Mexican indigenous subjects by living in close proximity to them while also working to help improve the lives of the working class and the indigenous population. Modotti's gendered photographic aesthetic doesn't differ significantly from Gilpin's except that Modotti not only photographed indigenous subjects, she became involved in Mexican culture and politics, which clearly informed an "ample human view of things" in her photographs. Eventually, unlike Gilpin and even Porter, her involvement in Mexican politics would make her question whether she could be effective as both an activist and an artist or whether the energy required to be either a good artist or a good activist robbed her of the energy necessary to excel in both roles.

Regardless of this difference between Porter and Modotti, they do share an attribute that Porter used to describe a "resilient and firm, feminine and calm" character in her book review of W. L. George's *Caliban*; they share a "deadly female accuracy of vision that cannot be deceived" (*Uncollected Early Prose*, 40). This could well be Porter's own definition of a new way of seeing, one that utilizes a gendered photographic aesthetic and manifests in ways that incorporates her non-white subjects and works not only toward creating identity but also toward questioning gender roles and the creation of identity within a particular time and geography, that of post-revolutionary Mexico. Utilizing that deadly female accuracy of vision, both Porter and Modotti were able to see

and register the truth of what was happening to the Mexican indigenous and working-class population in the wake of the revolution, the people who became their subjects. Mexican photographer, Manuel Alvarez Bravo (whose wife Lola would eventually become an accomplished photographer in her own right), took this picture of Porter in Mexico in 1930 (fig. 25), an image that captures the intense, unwavering vision that



Fig. 25 *Katherine Anne Porter*, Manuel Alvarez Bravo, 1930  
© University of Maryland Libraries

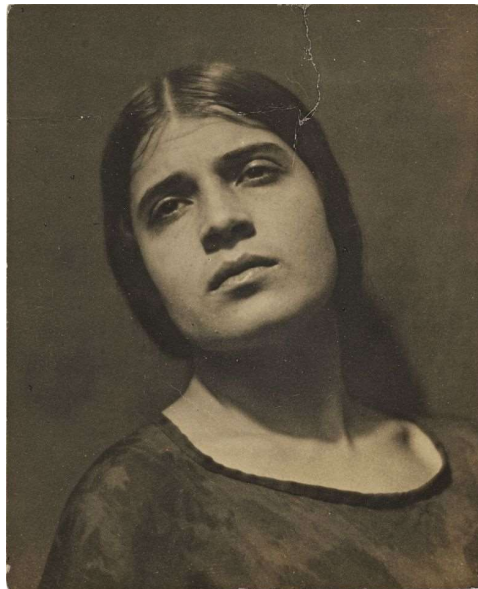


Fig. 26 *Tina Modotti*, Edward Weston, 1924  
Private collection © photo Christie's

would be expressed in her writing. Weston took a similar portrait, one of many, of Modotti. Like Bravo's portrait of Porter, Weston has captured Modotti's deadly serious, penetrating gaze, a gaze she, too, would exchange while photographing her indigenous subjects.

Porter's web of connections, that began with her connections to a group of artists in Greenwich Village in New York, would expand across the border into Mexico include artists, writers and intellectuals such as Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, Adolfo Best-Maugard, Anita Brenner, Edward Weston, and it would also include photographer Tina Modotti. Within this expansive web of artists in Mexico is where Porter and Modotti would establish their identities as artists. Mexico "was still reeling from the years of revolution, its daily life pitching back and forth between bursts of feverish growth and political upheaval" (Hooks 89), that "set the stage for the cultural reforms of the 1920s" (Adams 106) that sprang from a nation working to redefine itself in the wake of the revolution. To accomplish this redefinition, intellectuals looked to the arts, particularly indigenous arts, creating a cultural renaissance that was "strongly nationalistic in orientation and was based on the exaltation of Mexico's indigenous and popular traditions in the arts" (Delpar 12). Just as American artists and writers (Käsebier, Gilpin, Cather) looked to American indigenous "genuine cultures" to redefine American-ness after the WWI, Mexican culture was pursuing a similar project to redefine Mexican-ness after the revolution. Some of the Mexican artists participating in this revolution also crossed the border into the United States and frequented progressive, cultural hubs like Greenwich Village in New York in the 1920s, which is where Porter went to begin to develop herself as a writer. She writes in a letter to her sister, Gay, "I needed literary

people whom I respected. I needed conversations” (quoted in Unrue 65). This is where Porter met Mexican artists like Adolfo Best-Maugard, who, along with other Mexican artist friends in the Village, told her “stories about the Mexican cultural revolution” (70) and convinced her to go to Mexico to find inspiration and the opportunity to develop as a writer who could contribute to that cultural revolution.

Although Cather and Laura Gilpin shared an affinity for Mexico and the American Southwest with Porter and Modotti, Porter and Modotti actually moved to Mexico, which became for them, a large site of transcultural exchange. Rachel Adams describes them as part of a “trans-American cohort that emerged out of Mexico City, where—for a brief period—authors, artists, critics, and policy makers sought to revitalize Mexico’s ancient indigenous traditions in the service of a modern project of social, cultural, and political reform” (“Tradition” 234). This cohort was made up of many kinds of artists and it included, among many others, Mexican artists such as painter, filmmaker, and screenwriter Adolfo Best Maugard, muralist Diego Rivera, painter Frida Kahlo, painter and muralist José Clemente Orozco (who would paint a portrait of writer Julia Peterkin during one of her visits to New York), and Mexican writer and anthropologist, Anita Brenner. Brenner’s project, *Idols Behind Altars*, chronicled the history of Mexican art up to the 1920s and contributed to the rebirth of Mexican culture “that was in part defined by the very images Brenner commissioned” (Minera, “How One Woman Helped Invent Modern Photography”) from Weston and Modotti.

Collectively, this cohort brought Mexican art and culture out from under the cloud of stereotypes that saw Mexico, as Brenner described, as a country “so long camouflaged in bandits, oil, and revolution” but now emerges post-revolution with “an art which is not

only a significant expression of itself, but a rebirth of genuine American art” (from an article for the *New York World* reprinted in Adams 125). Brenner’s project involved a measure of collaboration between Brenner, who wrote the text, and Weston and Modotti, who provided photographs. Porter certainly contributed to this project of cultural revolution as well by writing the catalog that would accompany the first exhibition of Mexican art and culture in the United States, *Outline of Mexican Popular Arts and Crafts* (included in *Uncollected Early Prose of Katherine Anne Porter* pp. 136-187,) because Porter was “drawn to the uncorrupted culture of the Mexican Indian” (125) much as Cather was attracted to the ancient Indian culture of the American Southwest, although Porter’s interest focused on living Indians.

Just as a search for a “genuine culture” after the First World War produced a heightened interest in the American Southwest and American indigenous art and culture, a similar endeavor was occurring in Mexico, referred to as *indigenismo*,<sup>7</sup> “an invented concept designed to consolidate Mexico’s diverse native populations into a coherent whole” (Adams 109). David Luis-Brown explains this further by describing *indigenismo* as “the variety of such reformist practices and discourses adopted by *ladinos* (non-Indians) on behalf of Indians and practiced by political officials, artists, and writers alike” (180). Artists, such as Porter and Modotti, contributed to the Mexican cultural renaissance that embraced Mexican indigenous art and culture. Unrue seems to echo Stocking’s explanation of white American culture’s yearning for indigenous “genuine culture” by explaining that Porter was well aware of “the appeal Mexico had for Anglo-Americans. It offered a primitivism that was on the one hand an escape from economic and social turmoil in other parts of the world and on the other an opportunity to return to

an idyllic plane of existence, a desire that seemed more indigenously American than anything else” (Unrue, *Truth and Vision* 134). Adams goes on to declare that women in particular, “played an integral role in creating and sustaining the Mexican renaissance, a term coined by Anita Brenner” (Adams “Tradition” 235). Moreover, Katherine Anne Porter and Tina Modotti were two of three seminal women artists (including Anita Brenner) for whom Adams claims “the quality and significance of their accomplishments is exceptional. The literary and visual texts they produced are an integral part of the aesthetic and political accomplishments of the Mexican renaissance” (*Continental Divide* 105). Modotti worked with Brenner, contributing photographs for *Idols Before Altars*, and Porter later reviewed this collection, praising Modotti’s work as a photographer. Before that, Porter wrote the catalog for the first exhibit of Mexican art in the U.S., the “Traveling Mexican Popular Arts Exposition” that opened in Los Angeles in November of 1922 featuring Mexican folk art as well as the work of contemporary Mexican artists. Modotti “contributed to the exhibition catalogue” (Argentero 61), although it’s not clear specifically what she contributed though she was in Los Angeles at the time the exhibit opened there. Regardless, as members of the “trans-American cohort,” Adams says they, “engaged dynamically with their environment; they did not simply participate in the Mexican renaissance, but they also had a hand in creating it as a national and international phenomenon” (*Continental Divide* 104). Further, Adams explains, “their work contributed to the rise of an American modernism that was specifically oriented toward Mexico but also traveled outward to the continent and the world” (105). Porter would accomplish this in her writing, both fiction and nonfiction, and Modotti through her photography, but there are areas of note where their work intersects through shared

concerns and motifs inspired by their experiences and observations in Mexico, and there are places where they differ with regard to their responses to and their involvement with the political climate in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Although considered one of the Anglo-Americans attracted to post-revolutionary Mexico, Modotti was Italian-born and moved with her family to the United States where she lived for ten years in San Francisco and Los Angeles before she moved to Mexico in 1923. In Mexico, she worked first as photographer Edward Weston's model and assistant before she became a successful photographer herself and eventually a political activist working on behalf of indigenous Mexicans and the working class while also photographing them. Porter, on the other hand, was born in a Texas border town but drew inspiration as a beginning writer from her time spent in Mexico from 1920-1931. The "deadly female accuracy of vision" each of them used wasn't notable simply because it was a female vision, but because it also employed a gendered photographic aesthetic. Modotti later articulated her version of this aesthetic vision in a letter to Edward Weston as looking at the world with a "photographic eye wide awake" (Stark, *The Archive* 52). For Porter, this aesthetic manifested in her use of fictional photographs and photographic language describing indigenous Mexican subjects. At the same time, Modotti produced poignant photographs, human documents, featuring images of similar subjects. Both Porter and Modotti claimed agency as artists through their portrayals of their indigenous subjects not only to mark post-revolution hope and ambivalence, but also, in varying degrees, to champion Mexican indigenous culture and art while interrogating the process of identity creation as women artists.



One of Modotti's biographers describes the climate of Mexico in the 1920s: "The 1920s Mexican renaissance has been compared with that of Russian art of the same period. In both countries, an old regime was overthrown—tsarism and Porfiriato—and society reconstructed, a task in which the artists' role was to produce a new art for the new society" (Argentero 54). This connection shows up in Porter's short story, "Hacienda," which features Russian filmmakers looking to create a movie about Mexico and Mexican culture. However, Porter's introduction to Mexico's post-revolution cultural renaissance began during her time in Greenwich Village in 1919 and 1920. Having grown up in a border town in Texas, she claimed in an interview with Hank Lopez for *Harper's Magazine* in 1965 that her hometown of San Antonio was "always full of Mexicans really in exile—since Diaz was overthrown...so, we kept up with things in Mexico" (*Katherine Anne Porter Conversations* 121). However, while in Greenwich Village, Porter "found herself...among artists and Bohemians who lived for their work and were restrained by none of the conventions of ordinary society," which created an atmosphere that was "completely congenial to her temperament" (Givner 141). Adolfo Best-Maugard was one of these artists who assured Porter, "In Mexico something wonderful is going to happen—is already happening. We're in a period of great revolutionary change in every aspect of our lives" (Unrue 70). It was also Best-Maugard who arranged for the *Magazine of Mexico*, "a publication backed by conservative American bankers" (Stout 47), to offer Porter a job, for which Porter was required to travel to Mexico to get material for the magazine. Best-Maugard also wrote letters of introduction for her (46), and in October 1920, Porter arrived in Mexico City.

The Mexico where “something wonderful was going to happen” had been “in a state of revolutionary upheaval for nearly a decade” (Givner 148), upheaval Porter alluded to being aware of while growing up in San Antonio. However, Mexico City post-revolution was vastly different from the Mexican border towns Porter knew as a child. There was a grandness to this city, combining centuries old structures with modern cars traveling the boulevards. Outside the city, however, “neighborhoods varied from patrician affluence to abject poverty” (Unrue 73), a contrast she reproduced in her short story “Hacienda.” When Alvaro Obregón was sworn in as president of Mexico shortly after Porter arrived, “Porter shared the hopes of the new administration and took an active part in the program of reforms in education and the arts” by teaching dance classes at a girls’ high school in addition to her writing assignments (Givner 149). She also began writing for and eventually edited the English language section of a Mexican newspaper, *El Heraldo de México* in addition to the *Magazine of Mexico*. All of these things set the stage for Porter to begin creating her identity as a writer, the underlying purpose for her trip to Mexico. She planned to gather material for a book she hoped to write on the country, although she explained in a letter to the editor of *Century Magazine* in 1923 that “there was nothing so mechanical as that” because her experiences became a part of her through a “process of absorption [that] went on almost unconsciously” (*Collected Essays* 356). This indicates her writing was not meant to be mere reportage, even in the essays she wrote about Mexico. Porter claimed that Mexico felt like an extension of home, a trans-American space she described as “a borderland of strange tongues and commingled races,” which she said made her feel as if she “had never been out of America” (356). And though Porter initially wrote glowing letters home about her experiences there,

stating in a letter to her sister in December 1920, “Life here is a continual marvel to the eye, and to the emotions” (quoted in Walsh 21), her enthusiasm about post-revolution era Mexico would eventually wane. In spite of the waning, Alvarez states in the preface to Porter’s *Uncollected Early Prose*, it’s clear that “Mexico contributed in some mysterious way to her development into an artist” (viii), perhaps through her profound interest in and connection to Mexican indigenous art and culture, which she would introduce to American culture.

A few years after arriving in Mexico, Porter would articulate the aesthetic she was developing in her writing while in Mexico. In a letter to the editor of *The Century* in 1923, she explained that the stories she wrote there are “fragments, each one touching some phase of a versatile national temperament” like a series of photographs, capturing the “aesthetic magnificence” that marked “the true genius of the race.” But ultimately, she claims she was merely writing about all the things that were “native” to her, including her experiences in Mexico, which were part of the large borderland she inhabited. Given that, she claimed “the artist can do no more than deal with familiar and beloved things,” which she includes in her “fragments” (*Collected Essays* 356). Also given her admiration for Willa Cather, she seems to have agreed with Cather’s attitude toward women artists and marriage. However, while Cather maintained women could not be both good wives and good artists, Porter married several times and had many affairs. In spite of her multiple marriages and affairs, she explained in an article appearing in *The Evening Sun* in 1969, that “writing took first place” and that “[t]o be an artist—No marriage was worth giving up what I had” (*Conversations*, edited by Givner 137). Thus, she ignored gender norms by becoming a good artist at the expense of three husbands who she said “couldn’t

live with me because I was a writer and, now and then, writing took first place” (137) at a time when gender norms dictated that a woman was expected to suppress her artistic production in favor of attending solely to home and family.

Unlike Porter, Modotti never married, although her relationship with poet Roubaix “Robo” de l’Abrie Richey was presented as a marriage in either 1917 or 1918 to please Robo’s family (Argentero 29). Except for the ruse of marriage to Robo, Modotti never conformed to the gender norms of her time. She began a career in California as an actress, taking advantage of the fact that her Italian beauty rendered her exotic in American culture, but for some, her exoticness sometimes overshadowed the seriousness of her later artistic achievements. She moved with Robo to Los Angeles and pursued work in films, proving she was clearly comfortable in front of a camera, but she found the work unfulfilling. Ironically, in one film in 1917, *The Tiger’s Coat*, she played a Mexican servant who flees to the United States to escape poverty, a role that emphasized Modotti’s dark, sensual Italian exoticism that could translate easily into Mexican exoticism (43) and foreshadowed the kinds of issues of class and race she would eventually address from behind the camera. Modotti had several affairs throughout her life, including the most famous affair she had with photographer Edward Weston, which began while she was living in Los Angeles with Robo. Weston was part of a Bohemian circle of artists in and around Los Angeles, much like Porter’s community of artists in Greenwich Village. Modotti would often visit Weston’s studio in Glendale, a small town outside Los Angeles. When she returned to Mexico with Weston in 1923, she worked as Weston’s model, assistant, and interpreter. They lived together openly without the pretense of marriage and worked in the same house. Like many women looking to learn

the art of photography, she enlisted Weston to teach her how to take photographs, and she was expected to assist Weston. In addition, she would “make all the necessary professional contacts” (Argenteri 62) for Weston while taking care of the household as well as Weston’s eldest thirteen-year-old son. This was more of a business arrangement than a domestic, gender norm-based expectation. Under Weston’s tutelage, her work may have shared subjects and motifs with her mentor, but her photographs are not merely derivative of Weston’s work. Modotti “forged ideas and found inspiration to fit her own state of mind and needs” (60), using a gendered photographic aesthetic to create her own, unique photographs that are evidence of her “deadly female accuracy of vision” through a photographic eye wide awake. For example, Modotti’s work differs from Weston’s not in beauty, but in her treatment of her non-white subjects.

Weston did not share Modotti’s concerns about the working class, “the empathy that Tina felt for the poor and the Indians and her approach to *indigenismo* were unknown to Weston, as his photographs show” (62). The images he produced while in Mexico, aside from the images he produced for Brenner’s project, consist mainly of portraits, modernist abstracts, nudes, landscapes and still lifes. Many of Modotti’s images also include portraits (which is how they made a living) and still lifes demonstrating modernist abstract qualities, but she “embraced Mexico and Mexican culture thoroughly” (80). Weston himself admits in his *Daybooks* that as they traveled around Mexico they depended on her “tact and sympathy for the Indians” without which, “Brett and I would never have finished the work” (175). That sympathy is evident in Modotti’s images of indigenous women and children, in the more heartbreaking photographs depicting the hard life of laborers (fig. 37). While Weston commented on the beauty of indigenous

women and culture, he was also very critical of them and the working class, stating there was “Too much sentimentality over the proletariat. Too much deification of the Indian” (196), but it is through Modotti’s empathetic connection with indigenous Mexicans and the working class that gave her the opportunity to apply a gendered photographic aesthetic to present them not only as individuals worth seeing, she eventually become an advocate working on their behalf to improve the quality of their lives. Modotti turned her back “on photographic traditions that viewed Indians as specimens to be cataloged or as accessories to a bucolic tradition” (Albers 160). Modotti would produce many photographs of indigenous life and culture, from babies suckling at their mothers’ breasts to iconic images like the one of the Indian woman shouldering a flag, an image that speaks to the contribution of indigenous women in the formation of Mexico’s new cultural identity.

Nevertheless, according to Armstrong, Modotti “has so often been overshadowed by her erstwhile lover, her own beauty as a body...even her image as avant-garde muse and comrade-in-arms” (23), which bestowed an exotic “otherness” upon her. Until recently, her work was eclipsed by Weston’s, whose photography was more widely known, although some scholars claim that some of her initial photographic images may have influenced some of the seminal work of Weston’s (Armstrong). Regardless, Margaret Hooks asserts “Modotti became an outstanding photographer in her own right, with her own clientele, her own methodology and certainly her own vision” (9). This became more evident after Weston returned to the United States. In spite of the absence of female mentors in her early development as a photographer, she would eventually enter a web of connection with women photographers through Weston, photographers

like Dorothea Lange and Consuelo Kanaga. She met both photographers in San Francisco in 1926 when she was there taking care of her sick mother. Lange let Modotti use her studio and darkroom for making portraits, and Consuelo Kanaga “provided Modotti with much needed professional advice and emotional support” (Lowe 30), helped Modotti pick out a camera, and “invited friends and potential patrons over to her studio one evening to view Modotti’s work” (30), which was relatively unknown in the United States. It was on this visit that Modotti began to form her own photographic aesthetic. She wrote to Weston in Mexico from San Francisco where she was visiting family, mentioning she had some “new ideas of working differently at photography” (Stark 42) though it would take time to articulate them.

Though her photographs were considered art, Modotti wasn’t satisfied that her work might be described as “art.” An article that appeared in *Mexican Folkways* in 1929 contains the only written statement of her photographic aesthetic. She asserted that her vision produced “honest photographs, without distortions or manipulations” (reproduced in *Illuminations*, edited by Heron 260) and without the soft focus used by Pictorialist photographers, such as Käsebier and Gilpin (her early work). In spite of that, she clearly shared the intent behind the work of both Käsebier and Gilpin, to produce images of people as “human documents” and to create a visual record of the working class and indigenous individuals who inspired the Mexican cultural renaissance, but who were often still marginalized after the revolution. Her belief that the camera could contribute a new way of seeing is also reflected in this article when she declares that photography provides “the most eloquent, the most direct means for fixing, for registering the present epoch” (261), and yet her images transcend mere photojournalism. Modotti’s

photographs, like Porter's textual imagery, textual photographs, and her use of a gendered, photographic aesthetic, offered a rare window into what was worth seeing below the southern border of the United States. Her work was intrinsically tied to the people and the politics of Mexico until she was deported by the Mexican government in 1930 for her ties with the Communist Party. Modotti continued her work long after Weston returned to his wife and the United States in 1926. Her work, to this day, remains partially shadowed by Weston's or referenced with regard to her romantic relationship with Weston. In 1983, the Nobel Prize-winning Mexican poet, Octavio Paz treated her like one of Hawthorne's scribbling women when he wrote a review of an exhibition featuring her photographs for *Vuelta* magazine describing her work as a "derivative oeuvre" because "[f]or Tina, photography was just an incident linked to her affair with her teacher and lover the photographer, Edward Weston" (quoted in Noble 64). However, Modotti's photographs speak for themselves even while her evolving relationship with the Mexican government degraded. In fact, Modotti's visual register and changing relationship with the Mexican government often dovetailed with a similar evolution in attitude in Porter's work.

The evolution of Porter's attitude toward and relationship with Mexico and its cultural renaissance as it relates to her "deadly female accuracy of vision" can be tracked through her writing, particularly in the essays "The Fiesta of Guadalupe" and "Xochimilco" and in the stories, "María Concepción," and "Hacienda." Porter's use of a gendered, photographic aesthetic is evident in these works, more so in her stories than in her essays, and she would incorporate this aesthetic more strongly in later stories such as "Old Mortality," which is included in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, written and published after



she left Mexico. This story delves deeper into Porter's creation of history and identity through fictional family photographs, photographs that play a critical role in the narrative much like the photographs in Cather's *My Ántonia*. However, my focus here is on specific works she created reflecting her experiences in Mexico. Porter's "accuracy of vision" would be called into question later, particularly with regard to some aspects of her work inspired by Mexico. Her sometimes romantic treatment of non-white subjects, such as indigenous Mexican men and women, was also criticized in much the same way Cather's work was criticized for romanticizing the indigenous cultures of the American Southwest. Further, critics like Jeraldine Kraver even assert that Porter "would adopt the mindset of a colonizer" (56) in spite of Porter's claim that Mexico was, as she wrote in the *Century Magazine* letter to the editor, her "familiar country" (*Collected Essays* 355). Though her disappointment with the failures of the revolution would grow, her sympathy for the indigenous Mexicans that the revolution failed, would also grow and that sympathy is evident in her work.

One of the first essays Porter published in *El Heraldo* in December of 1920, not long after she arrived in Mexico, reflects a bit of that settler colonial mindset, while also extending sympathy toward its indigenous community. "The Fiesta of Guadalupe" provides a detailed description of a religious festival for English-speaking readers of *El Heraldo*. Porter's sympathetic attitudes about the general condition of Mexico's indigenous population in the wake of the revolution and about the Catholic religion's relationship with the Indians are clearly represented in her word choices, although they are problematized by her tendency to also respond to the indigenous population from a colonizer's mindset. Porter doesn't apply a gendered photographic aesthetic as strongly in

this essay as she will eventually in her other pieces, but there are elements in this essay that anticipate that aesthetic that are repeated in later stories and reveal Porter's complicated relationship with post-revolutionary Mexico, which Kraver describes as "a love affair gone bad and gone bad fast" (49). The purpose of Porter's essay was to provide an account of the celebration commemorating the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, a poor, Mexican Indian, in 1531. As a result of Diego's vision, an image of the Virgin, not unlike a photographic image, was miraculously and permanently imprinted on the rough fabric of Diego's mantle or "tilma" (where it exists to this day in the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City). Porter explains that "Indians all over Mexico had gathered at the feet of Mary Guadalupe for this greatest fiesta of the year" (*Uncollected Early Prose* 33), to see the Holy Tilma, "whereon the queen of Heaven deigned to stamp her lovely image" (35). As Porter follows the procession of "tired, burdened pilgrims" (33), describing what they wear, what they carry, she also emphasizes their condition, which is reflected in their faces, faces that were "a little streaked with long-borne fatigue." She doesn't explain the cause of the fatigue, or of the "heavy, dolorous dream" (37) from which she insinuates they may not awaken, although one could assume Porter was alluding to the fact that living conditions for the rural, indigenous population had not improved post-revolution. However, as Thomas Walsh points out, "The insistent point of the sketch is not just the Indians' suffering, but also their attempt to relieve it through the Virgin of Guadalupe" (18). If the revolution had failed the indigenous population, so too did the Catholic Church, which had failed to alleviate the pilgrims' suffering. When Porter rewrote this essay in 1923, her pessimism would transmute the "dolorous dream" into an even more severe "deathly

dream” within which Porter hoped these pilgrims would not live in forever (*Collected Essays* 398).

While Porter describes walking among these pilgrims, she contrasts snapshots of the expressions on their faces with the expression on the face of the Virgin’s statue, the “Powerful Intercessor” to whom they go for succor. Unlike the strained faces of the Indians who flock to her, her face contains a “voluptuous softness” though her eyes are “vague and a little indifferent.” Even if she could move, Porter insists she would not “glance at the devout adorer who passionately clasps her knees and bows his head upon them” (*Uncollected Early Prose* 36) insinuating there is no exchange of gazes between a saint and those supplicants with whom she’s supposed to aid. In addition, the Virgin lies in repose with “her pale hands clasped” (35), as if she refuses to even reach out to the suffering pilgrims who reach out to her with their “work-stained hands” (36) and “ragged hands” (37). Of all the sights Porter records during the fiesta, the image that haunts her in the end becomes a metaphor for the suffering of the indigenous pilgrims is their “ragged hands,” which is an image that repeats in “María Concepción.” In fact, a focus on hands is a motif in Porter’s work that also figures prominently in Tina Modotti’s photographic images.

Adding to her critique of the Virgin, Porter even goes so far as to refer to Mary’s son on the crucifix, a figure in the same chapel as the statue of the Virgin, as “one magnificent Egoist” who thought he could redeem these people from death (35). Porter’s pessimism over the church’s ineffectualness to make changes in the lives of Mexican Indians is undeniable. However, she also expresses an element of a colonizer’s attitude in the way she distances herself from these Indians. She walks among them, but not with

them, creating enough of a colonizer's distance from which she can pass judgment on the "terrible reasonless faith in their dark faces" (35) and to register disappointment over the "anodyne of credulity" (36) they embrace hoping to alleviate their suffering. This seems to insinuate that Porter finds the Indians to blame, at least in part, for their own suffering.

On the other hand, Porter ends her essay by articulating a certain amount of sympathy for the Indians when she says she feels "their wounded hearts...under their work-stained clothes" (37). It's possible she identified at least in part with the wounded heart of the indigenous because her own heart was wounded by her disappointment with the failings of the revolution. Described as a part of a group of hopeful "political pilgrims" who came to Mexico in the wake of the revolution, Porter's own faith was dashed when she recognized that "the revolutionary state had failed to provide a model for effective action in a time of crisis" for the indigenous pilgrims she describes in this essay. But it is also Porter herself, as a political pilgrim, who found "no shrine at which to worship" in her "search for a new social and economic order" (Britton 127) in the post-revolution period. Hence, Porter passes as an invisible pilgrim among pilgrims.

In contrast to her treatment of the Indian pilgrims in "The Fiesta of Guadalupe," Porter later wrote an Edenic, romantic portrait of the Indians living in the small town of Xochimilco south of Mexico City, a town she visited several times with her friend Mary Doherty (Doherty was also Modotti's friend) who "became a teacher of Indian children" (*Uncollected Early Prose* 73). During one particular visit, which she recreates in this essay, Porter and her companions are transported along the village canals in a boat steered by a young Indian man they've hired. As in "Fiesta," a photographic aesthetic is not prevalent in her essay "Xochimilco," but it, too, contains elements that anticipate that

aesthetic in references to light and to specific images that Porter describes and that will also reappear in Modotti's photographs.

In this essay, published in the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1922, Porter celebrates indigenous primitivism and vitality, but she accomplishes that by romanticizing the Indians in Xochimilco, describing this "genuine culture" as "a splendid remnant of the Aztec race" who seem to be "a natural and gracious part of the earth they live in such close communion with." She also references the Indians' ability to live their lives separate from the recent political upheavals, describing them "grow[ing] their own food and flowers for the city markets" (75) and carrying their wares to the market to sell (an image that would repeat in "María Concepción"). They are an independent, self-possessed people and Porter treats them as an example of a "genuine culture," but her portrayal of them is problematized by her use of romantic language when she describes them as occupying an "idyllic plane of existence" to which Unrue refers (*Truth and Vision* 134). In contrast to the Indian pilgrims' faces in "Fiesta" that are "streaked with long-borne fatigue," the Indian women who have washed themselves in the water of the canal that flows through Xochimilco "spread their long hair on the rocks to dry, their shy heads thrown back, faces turned away a little, eyes closed before the sunlight" (*Uncollected Early Prose* 75) as opposed to the "Fiesta" pilgrims who inhabit a "dark and brooding land" (36). References to light repeat throughout this story, suggesting the beginning of Porter's development of a gendered photographic aesthetic. In further contrast to the streaked faces of the pilgrims, one young girl, another representative of the light-filled verdure in which the Indians of Xochimilco reside, approaches Porter to sell her flowers with a "pleasant face with round dark eyes" (76). In addition, the "ragged

hands” of the pilgrims are replaced by another reference to light in the “gleaming wet, brown hand” of the flower girl, a gleaming hand radiating light that is also connected to a product of the earth. This gleaming hand is not like the “worn hands of believers” reaching to “touch the magic glass” (36) entombing a Virgin who averts her eyes from them.

At the end of the story, there are more contrasts between the Indians of Xochimilco and the Fiesta pilgrims. The inhabitants of Xochimilco gather along the banks of the canal to commune with each other. They talk, they sing along with “a series of orchestras, scattered along the shady banks” (78). The pilgrims in “Fiesta” also sing, but Porter describes it as “shouting notes of joy a little out of tune” accompanied not by orchestras, but by the “hysteria of the old bells...shrieking praises to the queen of Heaven” (34), all of it creating a collective dissonance that further reflects her attitude about the deleterious effect of the Catholic Church. Porter doesn’t participate in any part of the fiesta, but in “Xochimilco,” she is not a silent observer. Porter recognizes individual tunes: “La Adelita,” “La Pajarera,” “La Sandunga,” and “La Nortena,” which she and her companions participate in by “hum[ming] the melody...with extraordinary tonal results” (78). There is no aural dissonance here. As they prepare to leave the town, their own boat boy who has been their captain during this visit, lies on a mat in the sun humming “Adelita softly,” his face turned to “the brilliant sky” (78). Thus, Porter leaves her readers with another light-filled image.

As for the song, “La Adelita,” it’s notable that this song is one of the most famous ballads of the Mexican Revolution that celebrates the woman who became one of the first *soldaderas* (women soldiers, see endnote 8) who fought along the men during the

revolution. The image of the *soldadera* would reappear in her story “María Concepción,” but here, Porter uses the song to present the image of one group of indigenous Mexicans who have managed to thrive in the post-revolution era, unlike the pilgrims of “Fiesta.” The inclusion of the song, “Adelita,” may also indicate that Porter believed the Indians of Xochimilco have realized “the revolution’s political ideal, a worker’s utopia” (*Truth and Vision* 25). If this is an indigenous, worker’s utopia, it’s a utopia that Porter still seems to enjoy at a lesser distance than in “Fiesta.” Although she and her companions participate in the singing, she still fails to make a connection, as they failed to do with the Indian children, but the children are “not to be detained for greetings, although we attempt to renew our slight acquaintance of the visit before this” (74).

Unlike Gilpin’s experience accompanying Elizabeth’s visits to the Navaho, in both “The Fiesta of Guadalupe” and “Xochimilco,” Porter either walks like a ghost among the pilgrims or she is nearly invisible, as she is in Xochimilco: “[T]he visiting stranger does not feel alien because he is not noticed” (*Uncollected Early Prose* 75). While Porter’s friend, Mary Doherty, developed personal relationships with the Indians as a teacher of their children, it’s not clear whether Porter, herself, developed any relationships with the people and culture of whom she created such a glowing portrait. On one hand, she refers to herself as a ghost, but on the other hand, she also says she and her companions tried to greet “fat and cheerful” Indian babies, but failed to make the connection. In addition, Porter never names who is traveling with her on this trip in this particular essay as if they are ghosts, too. Doherty may not have accompanied her on this visit because one could assume she, as a teacher, would have had more than a “slight acquaintance” with the Indians, particularly with the children. For Porter to describe her

relationship with the Indians of Xochimilco as “slight,” indicates she still maintains a certain distance from the subjects she romanticizes in the essay. Further, the fact that she is riding in a “canaoa,” a type of canoe they hire to ferry them along Xochimilco’s canals, also keeps Porter at a distance from the individuals in the village, particularly as it seems she and her distance from the individuals in the village, particularly as it seems she and



Fig. 27 *Untitled* (“Market Scene-Xochimilco”), Tina Modotti, n.d.  
©San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

her companions never leave the boat and the village passes before them like a series of scenes, perhaps passing a market scene similar to the image Modotti produced of Xochimilco.

In spite of the light-filled, romantic optimism Porter uses to create her images of Xochimilco, there’s still a hint of pessimism under the surface. Some scholars (Walsh) assert Porter’s early works, like “Fiesta,” are more reflective of Porter’s own identity, revealing “her pessimistic cast of mind,” which speaks to “the very nature of her psychology” (Walsh 19). Walsh asserts that Porter’s own “deadly female accuracy of vision that cannot be deceived” was informed by that pessimism. Her initial optimistic



vision of a post-revolution political and artistic renaissance that was fed by the enthusiasm of her Mexican artist friends in Greenwich Village, couldn't be sustained when she saw that the renaissance and the leaders who initiated it failed to help those still most in need. Even her highly romanticized portrait of the Indians of Xochimilco betrays a bit of Porter's pessimism. As Walsh explains, Porter's creation of "an Eden whose prelapsarian dwellers enjoy a perfect harmony with beneficent nature" could have been created "as if to escape the reality she experienced elsewhere in Mexico" (34). However, even if her attitude toward Mexican Indians themselves was problematic, she "developed a keen and ultimately transformative interest in Mexican folk art, leading to her production of the booklet *Outline of Mexican Arts and Crafts* in 1922" (Stout 72). Further, her first work of fiction, the short story "María Concepción," is considered "one of the most tangible results of Porter's acquaintance with Mexico and its people" (72), and it became the foundation of her identity as a writer.

"María Concepción" seems to combine her initial optimism about post-revolution Mexico, her romantic attitude toward Mexican Indians like the attitude she expresses in her essay "Xochimilco," her love of indigenous art and artifacts, as well as some of the pessimism she includes in "The Fiesta of Guadalupe," combined with elements from her own life. However, unlike in "Fiesta," she substitutes a focus on "primitive justice" for "the political theme—the absurdity of revolutionists' trying to civilize the primitive Indian" (Unrue 94). Also in this story, Porter applies a gendered photographic aesthetic in the way she creates her main character, María, and in how she weaves the photographic act into the narrative like Cather does in *The Professor's House*, an aesthetic she would develop more strongly in her story "Hacienda."

The criticism leveled at Cather with regard to her attitude toward the Indians is similar to the critical response to Porter's portrayal of indigenous Mexicans. Stout admits that Porter "attributes to her Indian characters a set of traits that may strike some readers as being stereotypical or reductive, but which were assuredly intended as a sympathetic presentation" (72). This is evident in the way Porter creates the character of María in "María Concepción." María is depicted as a strong, independent woman, just as Porter portrays indigenous women in "Xochimilco." María is a strong, independent indigenous woman who carries herself with "a free, natural, guarded ease" and who is "entirely contented" (*Collected Stories* 3), but Porter also uses the word "primitive" to describe María and her fellow Indian villagers. While this term may seem reductive, Porter, the writer, doesn't use it as a pejorative descriptor. Porter equates primitivism with the characteristics she bestows on her Indian characters, characters who express an inherent dignity and vitality that springs from their natural state, their connection to the land. Even before Porter arrived in Mexico, her work with Best-Maugard in New York focused on ancient Mayan and Aztec designs. They planned to write a textbook on the subject as well as to write a Mexican ballet that would "incorporate primitive Mexican dances." Best-Maugard's interest in primitive design "coincided with a revival of the primitive that was very much a part of the revolution going on in Mexico" (Unrue, *Truth and Vision*, 13) and so "Porter was drawn formally into the established interest in Mexico's primitive past" (16) that fueled the cultural renaissance in the post-revolution period. Porter's story, "María Concepción," is about "pure primitivism in a way that none other of Porter's stories is" (24).

Even if it may appear as if Porter seems to be romanticizing her indigenous subjects, similar to Cather's treatment of Native Americans in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, her depiction of them differs from Cather's in that María's character is alive, she is clearly connected to nature and fertility (she is pregnant), she demonstrates self-sufficiency (María sells her fowl in the market), and she is content, containing a serenity that is "instinctive." Her vitality is palpable, particularly when Porter contrasts María with Givens, an American archaeologist (based on real archaeologist, William Niven) who employs the local Indians to help dig up ancient Indian artifacts, responds to them like a typical colonizer. Porter says he "liked his Indians best when he could feel a fatherly indulgence for their primitive childish ways" (7). Givens' response appears to contrast with Porter's use of the word and demonstrates a pejorative application of the term "primitive" with regard to the indigenous, not unlike the response of the white teachers toward Indian students in Zitkála-Šá's *American Indian Stories*. And like Zitkála-Šá, Porter contrasts María's dignified Indian character with Givens', a white man who cringes when María slits one of her bird's throats and pulls the head off. Although he plans on cooking and eating the bird, his response to that act implies he believes there's a barbaric aspect to Indian behavior, though this is a bird that he has chosen for lunch. And while Givens is under the illusion that he is a benevolent paternal figure who saves Indians like María's husband from occasional scrapes with the law, María regards Givens "condescendingly." To her, he is "that diverting white man who had no woman of his own to cook for him and moreover appeared not to feel any loss of dignity in preparing his own food" (7). Porter even provides a striking visual, physical contrast between "primitive" María and white, American archaeologist Givens. While María

walks with a “straight back...[and the] natural, guarded ease of the primitive woman” (3), Givens squats in the dirt like an animal, cooking his bird, the one María just killed. However, María understands that because this white man is her husband’s “chief,” he must be “placated” (7). She therefore treats him with respect in spite of the way he speaks about her husband Juan “with exactly the right shade of condescension” (8). María’s primitivism, her strength, her dignity, however romanticized by Porter, makes her a strong, positive female at the heart of this story, in a culture where, in spite of the revolution, women, particularly indigenous women, were often not the center of anything and were still expected to remain in the domestic sphere.

Porter applies a gendered photographic aesthetic to emphasize this contrast between María’s indigenous primitivism and the colonizer’s attitude about “primitivism” embodied by individuals like Givens and perhaps the post-revolutionary government, as well as contrasting indigenous customs with Catholicism. Stout comments on this when she refers to the “pictorial presentation and the clarity that characterize the style of ‘María Concepción’” (75). Porter presents an initial image of María Concepción as if it was captured by the lens of a Pictorialist photographer: María is pictured walking down the middle of a “white dusty road” (*Collected Stories* 3), framed by dark shade on either side of the road. It’s easy to imagine as well, the light around her softened by the dust her feet disturbs. Further, the lines of María’s body are rounded with “swelling life” (3). Rendered in this way, María is presented as a Madonna figure not unlike those found in Käsebier’s domestic photographs. María is Catholic, and yet she remains within her indigenous community among those like Lupe who continue to observe the old rituals. The story also ends with a similar Madonna-like figure, featuring María sitting cross-

legged on the floor in the “silver air” (21) of the moonlight with a child cradled in her lap. And as her body was described as swelling with life in the beginning of the story, so now at the end, the earth underneath mother and child “seemed to swell and recede together with a limitless, unhurried, benign breathing,” creating again the softness evident in a Pictorialist photograph. The entire narrative, including the tragedy and violence in the center of the narrative is framed by these images of María, which works to unite the Christian image of the Madonna with that of a fecund, indigenous earth goddess, like Xochitl, the Aztec goddess Porter had included in her first version of her essay “Xochimilco,” whose reference was excised for the Christian readers of the *Christian Science Monitor*, where it was published in 1931. Unlike the pessimism Porter registers with regard to the Catholic religion and its deleterious relationship with the Mexican Indians in “The Fiesta of Guadalupe,” Porter found a way to resolve some of that pessimism in “María Concepción.”

Nevertheless, in between those Pictorialist framing images, Porter inserts darker, pessimistic moments. María loses the child she was bearing in the beginning of the story, and her husband abandons her to join the revolution with his lover. However, when they return, María murders her husband’s lover and claims the lover’s baby as her own, the child with which she’s pictured as Madonna and child at the end of the story. Some of what happens in this story reflects events in Porter’s personal life, which may provide an example of how Porter assumes the agency of indigenous subjects in order to work out and make sense of the turmoil in her life at that time. In fig. 28, Porter literally assumes the mantle of an indigenous women in a photograph though the date and the identity of the photographer are unknown. Adams suggests part of her project in claiming agency



Fig. 28 Katherine Anne Porter in the dress of “a town Indian woman,” Mexico City, Mexico, July-August 1930. Katherine Anne Porter Papers, Series 12, Box 3, Item 1035, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Maryland Libraries.

through indigenous subjects stems from her belief, however erroneous, that their uncomplicated lifestyle and connection to the land “had a salutary effect on women.” Native women had no known neuroses, which is important to Porter because she “frequently complained of nervous illnesses...[and] she believed [them] to be free of the afflictions that plagued her contemporaries” (117). Porter’s act of appropriating indigenous garb appears like an outward expression of the colonial mindset for which some criticized her, because while she may assume the costume of Mexican women, gender norms in Mexico were far more rigid for Mexican women.

Americans such as Porter, Modotti, and other artists, were free to live as they wished. Porter had numerous affairs while in Mexico, and yet she could identify with the traditional, female domestic protagonist of this story because, like María Concepción, Porter was also betrayed by a lover by whom she became pregnant. In 1921, Unrue

describes her affair with Nicaraguan poet, Salomón de la Selva as “the most serious and affecting of her love affairs” (84). During this time, Porter also became involved in a film shot by photographer Roberto Turnbull, the photographer who would produce the images for her catalog, *Outline of Mexican Arts and Crafts*. He also took many photographs of Porter during that period, including numerous images of her legs that Turnbull needed for the film he was making, and a nude portrait that “she kept all her life and copied to give to selected friends” (85), demonstrating how comfortable she was in front of a camera as a subject of the male gaze (as was Modotti). It was also at this time that she discovered she was pregnant and chose to end the pregnancy even though, as Unrue states, “The risks associated with abortion in 1921 in Mexico were high...[and] the procedure could be fatal” (86). Porter survived, and later, made an “attempt to begin shaping the experience into fiction,” parts of which are evident in “María Concepción.” While Porter’s agency in donning indigenous garb could be seen as evidence of a colonial mindset, it can also be seen as a very personal act for Porter, as her attempt to absorb the needed strength and vitality she sees and celebrates in indigenous Mexican women, the same strength and vitality she bestows upon the character of María Concepción, so she may enjoy, vicariously, the primitive justice meted out by María upon those who betrayed her.

Whatever Porter’s motives, Adams explains, “Porter’s indigenism landed her in a contradictory position” (*Continental Divide* 117). On one hand, Porter recognized that the Mexican cultural revolution produced the opportunity to share Mexican and indigenous culture and art to a greater audience, particularly to the American audience. On the other hand, her piece, “The Fiesta of Guadalupe,” indicts those who proposed to uplift the

indigenous population and to incorporate their culture into the new Mexican national identity, but who failed the indigenous population and left them stranded in “a heavy, dolorous dream” (*Uncollected Early Prose* 37). In writing “María Concepción,” Porter created “one of the few literary works of its time to grant subjectivity to an Indian woman” (*Continental Divide* 119). And in order to portray María Concepción as she did, Walsh asserts that in assuming the mantel of an indigenous woman, Porter “attempted to get inside her skin and feel the suffering of the Indian that she only witnessed from the outside in” (83). However, the photograph of Porter, a white American wearing indigenous dress, does complicate how her work is received.

With further regard to Porter’s use of a gendered photographic aesthetic in “María Concepción,” Porter’s insertion of a photographer at Givens’s archeological site draws a parallel with Cather’s Tom Outland, who photographs the Indian artifacts on Blue Mesa in *The Professor’s House*. Porter’s photographer has no name or gender (assumed male as most of those working for Givens and William Niven, the real archaeologist upon whom Givens is based, were male), and unlike Tom in *The Professor’s House*, Givens employs Indians to dig up artifacts from the “lost city of their ancestors” (6). Moreover, Givens is more like Fechtig, the German collector who buys all of the Blue Mesa artifacts, who treats the artifacts he unearths like acquired treasures as opposed to objects that represent a shared history as they did for Tom Outland. Here, María Concepción is a living Mother Eve, although Outland’s Eve might also have stood in astounded observance of the archeologist’s glee in digging up broken, useless shards as the Indians who work for him do, for whom Givens’s “unearthly delight...in finding these worn-out things was an endless puzzle” (7). However, the act of photographing these artifacts



anticipates Turnbull's photographs of artifacts that will be included in the catalog Porter assembles for an exhibit of Mexican Folk Art destined to tour in the United States. In addition, it also anticipates a similar project, Anita Brenner's *Idols Behind Altars*, which explores the indigenous cultural roots of Mexican art. Brenner hired Weston and Modotti to photograph ancient artifacts and Mexican art and included their photographs in this project. Porter would review this book favorably for the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1929, and in it, she drew specific attention to Modotti's photographs.

As mentioned before, Porter based the character of Givens on archaeologist William Niven, who she knew personally and whose excavation site at Azcapotzalco she visited several times, at least once with photographer Roberto Turnbull, who would produce the photographs for Porter's catalog of the Mexican art exhibition. Stout says "Porter became well acquainted with the excavations of pre-Columbian artifacts being carried out by William Niven" and that she also assisted him in his work (75), while Unrue states that Porter claimed to have gotten the model for the story of María Concepción and her and her husband from "a woman she had seen at Niven's dig," although "Niven mentioned no such story about his foreman and the foreman's wife" in his diaries. This is one instance that calls into question the "accuracy" of Porter's deadly female vision, at least in this case. Regardless, among a collection of Niven's photographs (Niven, himself, was a photographer who documented his own work), there is "one of Katherine Anne standing between them" (94), meaning the foreman and his wife. From that encounter, Porter produced the story of María Concepción, even if the accuracy or the existence of an account about Niven's foreman and his wife is questionable. The photograph of Porter standing between the smiling Indian woman and

her husband can be found in a book on Niven's work by authors Robert Wicks and Roland Harrison, *Buried Cities, Forgotten Gods Regardless* (188). Porter shared Niven's (and Tom Outland's) belief in the importance of photographing artifacts and Mexican art, not just to catalog findings as Outland's and Niven's photographs do, but to share those findings with the world outside Mexico, which both Porter and Modotti would do.

Turning away from a focus solely on Indian characters, Porter expanded her use of a gendered, photographic aesthetic in her inclusion of the fictional photographs and photographic language in her short story "Hacienda." Although she wrote this story after leaving Mexico in 1931, it's directly influenced by her visit to Hacienda Tetlapayac north of Mexico City after she was invited there by Russian film director, Sergei Eisenstein to observe the filming of one of the segments of his movie about Mexico, *¡Qué viva México!* "Hacienda," which was originally written as an essay, includes her most pessimistic observations of post-revolution Mexican politics, particularly as they affected the indigenous population (Stout 81). According to Givner, this story was "a summation of all her feelings about Mexico" (239), and Bittner described it as her "most devastating critique of the political-bureaucratic perversion of revolutionary zeal" (117) a product of her "deadly female accuracy of vision." This is the same kind of pessimism Porter initially expresses in her essay, "The Fiesta of Guadalupe" and hints at in "María Concepción." However, unlike in "María Concepción," the photographs in this story are not limited to artifacts but are produced as part of Eisenstein's film project, an actual project that would never come to fruition, perhaps symbolizing Porter's attitude about the revolution as a whole and its inability to effect lasting positive change.

As in “The Fiesta of Guadalupe,” Porter immediately refers to the Indians on a train the narrator and her group are taking to the hacienda as “a dark inferior people” (135), but it is not the narrator’s opinion of the Indians. The narrator’s use of that phrase is made with regard to the negative response of one of the other characters, Kennerly, to the Indian passengers. As she does in “María Concepción,” Porter’s irony is evident in her comparison of the white American male character, Kennerly, with the native Mexican population. Kennerly is obsessed with the need to ride in a train car that would exclude the common, indigenous population. Porter describes Kennerly as being taller in stature than “the nearest Indian,” but his “moral stature” (135) is measured by his disdain for the distasteful odor that he describes emanating from the common masses, who ignore his display of distain because for them, “[w]hite men look all much alike to the Indians.....there is always one of them on every train” (136). It is they who travel with dignity and ease, happy in their own company compared to the frantic man who laments about the possible risk of infection from the local Mexican porters whose “filthy paws” may spread disease onto one’s luggage handles, identifying common passengers and porters as animals. With this comparison, Porter establishes her distaste for this kind of traveler, a white man traveling through a place he deems an “inconvenient country” (140). Porter seems to draw a distinction here between travelers who walk invisibly among the Mexican population, as Porter does in her essays, and those like Kennerly, who actively demonstrate a colonizer’s mindset by enthusiastically separating themselves from what they consider an inferior population, in spite of the fact that Kennerly is involved in a project to film that population. Porter also describes Kennerly in a way that evokes Faulkner’s blank faces in the photographic portrait of the Sutphens when she

refers to Kennerly's "blank blue eyes fixed in a white stare" (139). However, Kennerly's blankness is not produced by photographic replication. Rather, his blankness can arguably be explained by his lack of exchange with, or even his unwillingness to see those he is attempting to film. Porter implies through Kennerly's blank eyes his inability to appreciate or acknowledge members of the culture he is documenting, let alone participate in an exchange of gazes.

Later in the story, Porter also uses photographic language with regard to eyes and seeing when she describes one of the Russian filmmakers and photographer, Stepanov, as he responded to Kennerly with eyes that "flickered open, clicked shut in Kennerly's direction, as if they had taken a snapshot of something and that episode was finished" (163). And when Andreyev, who then produces and opens a folder of photographs related to the movie he is involved in shooting all over Mexico, Kennerly turns away "as if he wished to avoid overhearing a private conversation" (137), while Porter's protagonist and Andreyev examined the images in the folder.

In contrast to Kennerly, Porter's semi-autobiographical protagonist, sees these photographs and they inspire her to declare that someday she will "make a poem" to Mexico. She then begins describing a succession of images, several of which closely correspond to images that had been created by Tina Modotti (fig. 29), like the image of "Indians scrubbing their clothes to rags" (138). It could be argued that Porter may have included the description of this image after having seen Modotti's image, particularly when she repeats this image later in the story, referring to a fictional photograph from Andreyev's folder depicting "women kneeling at washing stones" (142). Another photo she describes features an image of girls "like dark statues...mantles [on their]...smooth



Fig. 29 *A Washer Woman's Hands*, Tina Modotti, 1927  
©MoMA, New York

brows, water jars on their shoulders” (142). This image, too, corresponds to another of Modotti’s photographs, that of a single female figure carrying a water jar on her shoulder, also with an emphasis on the hand holding the vessel steady. Considering “Hacienda” was inspired by Porter’s real trip to Hacienda Tetlapayac, it’s fair to assume Porter had seen Modotti’s work prior to writing her short story, particularly when she admitted she “knew all of the people around Rivera—Siqueiros, Tina Modotti, and Dr. Atl” (*Conversations* 127). Porter also makes reference in her story to the town of Tehuantepec, which is where Modotti made her portraits in 1929 of the dignified Tehuana women on the Tehuantepec Isthmus “where there still remained the vestiges of a matriarchal enclave” (Hooks 184), Indians Kennerly complained about by saying “They



Fig. 30 *Woman With Olla*, Tina Modotti, 1926  
©MoMA, New York

would drive any man crazy in no time. In Tehuantepec it was frightful” (*Collected Stories* 139). Modotti’s first one-woman exhibition in 1929 would most likely have included these images as well as other photographs that Porter evokes when describing the photographs in Andreyev’s folder. Porter, herself, was not in Mexico at the time of



Fig. 31 *Mother and Child, Tehuantepec*, Tina Modotti, 1920  
©Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

Modotti’s exhibition, but Modotti’s images were known among her friends, and she and Porter had many friends in common. The images in Modotti’s exhibition tell her story of Mexico in the same way Andreyev’s folder of photographs reveal the evolution of Porter’s attitude about post-revolution Mexico. The story’s narrator goes on to describe more images from the folder of photographs, lending more gravity to both Porter’s and Modotti’s “deadly female accuracy of vision.”

Porter contextualizes the lives of her indigenous characters by connecting them with the land, as does Cather. Porter accomplished this in the essays discussed here and in “María Concepción.” Cather’s subjects draw strength and identity from the landscapes of the American Southwest. The Indians in “Xochimilco” and “María Concepción,” are also connected to the land they live upon, but by the time Porter writes “Hacienda,” the

land has become ominous, and it is the camera that reveals the truth of that ominousness. This is a strong example of Porter applying a gendered photographic aesthetic when she describes how “the camera had seen this unchanged world as a landscape with figures, but figures under a doom imposed by the landscape” (142). Adams argues one reason for this doom is because “The revolution, which claimed to represent the Mexican people, left many of them in worse place than where they had started” (*Continental Divide* 118). However, Walsh suggests, this doom may also be indicative of Porter’s own pessimism informing the “deadly” aspect of her vision, considering in each of these images in the folder contains the aura of death for Porter’s protagonist. This protagonist explains that “the camera had caught and fixed in moments of violence and senseless excitement, of cruel living and tortured death, the almost ecstatic death expectancy which is in the air of Mexico...In the Indian the love of death had become a habit of the spirit” (143). The death expectancy in the air that she feels could be the result of ten years of violent revolution that failed to improve the lives of the Indians she sees around her. Andreyev even offers a sardonic comment as they examine images of Indians, one individual pictured in “hopeless rags” (145), that the poverty evident in the photograph “has been swept away by the revolution,” because the Mexican government, who gave their permission for the movie to be made, imposed a requirement that the film only portray a “glorious history of Mexico” (146) with none of the failures of the revolution, which this image of the poor Indian reveals. Porter’s protagonist understands Andreyev’s meaning because he neither smiles nor meets the protagonist’s eyes when he says it. Porter recognized that herself in her actual visit to Hacienda Tetlapayac, which became the model of the hacienda in the story which she describes as an “old-fashioned feudal

estate” (142) where Indians were low-class servants to Mexican, land-owning gentry. In the story, as in Porter’s real trip to Hacienda Tetlapayac, actual violence, a murder, had taken place just prior to the protagonist’s arrival. One of the villagers participating in the film had shot and killed his sister, perhaps through jealousy over the sister’s lover, also an actor in the film. This act provoked responses from other characters from alarm (thinking the film would be sued) to irritation (this will delay the film because an important actor is now in jail), to indifferent acceptance and boredom because “you know how a boy of sixteen loves to play with a pistol” (150) and later “we spoke again of the death of the girl...and all our voices were vague with the vast incurable boredom which hung in the air of the place” (151). Death, doom, and boredom hang in the air, even to the very end of the story while Stepanov follows the narrator and others around with his camera.

In addition to the photographs in Andreyev’s folder, Stepanov shoots snapshots of the narrator and other characters as they walk around the hacienda, creating his own photographic folder of their experience that the narrator catalogs similarly to the photos in the folder. However, by this point, the narrator is less interested in composing a poem to Mexico inspired by the images she sees. She now claims “we were tired of snapshots” as they’ve had their picture taken with “the dogs...on the steps with a nursling burro, with Indian babies; at the fountain on the long upper terrace to the south, where the grandfather lived; before the closed chapel door...in the patio still farther back with the ruins of the old monastery stone bath; and in the pulqueria” (166). These are similar to the images Andreyev produces from his folder that once inspired the narrator. Now, however, the narrator has witnessed life on the hacienda, which remains frozen in time as



a feudal estate served by the lower-class indigenous population whose clothes are in tatters. The last photos Stepanov takes focus on Vicente, the dead girl's lover. Vicente wouldn't let her brother (who was also his friend) and killer escape. Stepanov "gazed through the lens" at the figure of Vicente standing on a patio, "hat pulled down over his eyes...He had been standing there staring." In the next moment, he is standing again "framed in the archway" when Stepanov takes another picture of him. Porter's last photographic images reflect not only her own disillusionment, but the disillusionment of a generation of young Mexicans who were betrayed by a revolution that failed to help them. As such, Vicente sits "against the wall all afternoon, knees drawn up to his chin, hat over his eyes, his feet in their ragged sandals" (167), betrayed by a country, a friend, his lover dead. This is why the narrator declares at the end of the story, "I could not wait for tomorrow in this deathly air" (170), and Walsh reminds that "The narrator's escape from the hacienda coincides with Porter's escape from Mexico (163). The early promise she felt upon arriving in Mexico, her "yearning for a paradise" was supplanted by a sense of betrayal and "lost promise" (164) represented by the broken figure of Vicente.

Once again, Porter's description of Vicente with his knees drawn up and his ragged sandals evokes a similar image Modotti captured (fig. 32) as she sought to document those things the Mexican government didn't want presented to the world, letting her camera provide proof of the revolution's failures. Her photograph of a man sitting, hands clasped, his ragged sandals become the central focus of the image, corresponds to the textual image of Vicente at the end of "Hacienda." Unlike Porter, Modotti didn't leave Mexico because of the deathly air. Modotti joined the Communist Party in 1927, the party in which Diego Rivera was a member, among others, believing

that this party could help materialize the aid for the indigenous population who the revolution had failed. And in spite of her success as a photographer and the international appreciation of her work, shortly after her first one-woman exhibition at the end of 1929,



Fig. 32 *Untitled*, Tina Modotti, n.d.

she was arrested for allegedly being part of a plot to assassinate the new Mexican president Pascual Ortiz Rubio and jailed by the Mexican government. In February of 1930, she was deported. After being released from jail, she was given two days to leave the country and gave away or sold what she could, including some of her cameras. This explains why Porter wrote in 1931 that “she owned a camera ‘once used by Tina Modotti, who could work marvels with it’” (Hooks 206). Porter must have acquired the camera indirectly because she wasn’t in Mexico when Modotti was deported. Nevertheless, one of the marvels that Modotti produced that seemed to resonate with Porter is a specific motif that repeats in her work, as it does in Modotti’s, and as seen in fig. 32, the image of hands.

The most notable motif, a visual grammar that connects Porter's photographic aesthetic with the work of Tina Modotti, an image that she repeats in photograph-like flashes in "The Fiesta of Guadalupe," in "María Concepción," and in "Hacienda" is the image of hands, particularly the hands of Indian laborers. Images of workers' bodies, particularly hands, operated as "visual sign[s] of the new grammar of resistance that was simultaneously taking shape in the very heart of the country's machine-age modernity" (Fraser 98). This was true for artists in both Mexico and the U.S. However, for artists like Diego Rivera, hands also served as symbols providing "a critique of industrial society...[becoming] generative, mythical, earthy, and unbound" (109). For Porter, they are also symbolic of the very human suffering that she observed. Commenting on the image of hands in one of Rivera's murals in 1922, Porter said they made her "feel like weeping with pity for struggling, suffering human life" (quoted in Weschler 226), which Weschler asserts may have been "the first printed reference to one of the artists' murals in the American Press" (226). Stout notes "Tina Modotti would similarly emphasize the hands of workers in several of her photographs" (61), and in many instances, as did Rivera did in his murals, she would also present them as generative, earthy, and unbound even as they were also portraits that depicted the effects of the hardships of the working class. However, when hands are first mentioned in "The Fiesta of Guadalupe," Porter is describing the hands of the Virgin as she appeared before Juan Diego with her "pale hands clasped" (*Collected Essays* 396). In the chapel, the Virgin is presented as an inanimate statue with indifferent eyes, laying down with "clasped hands" (397). In contrast, the Indians' hands are not pale, not peacefully clasped. Their hands are

numerous and marked by a harsh life, and Porter applies a photographic aesthetic in the way she organizes these images.

At first, Porter counts “twenty brown and work-stained hands” (397) that are reaching out to touch the statue. However, the numbers of hands grow, becoming the “awful hands of faith, the credulous and worn hands of believers; the humble and beseeching hands of the millions and millions who have only the anodyne of credulity...groping insatiable hands reaching, reaching, reaching” (397, 398). While the Indians fix their eyes on Mary Guadalupe, it is the images of their hands that seem to move Porter. Such a powerful, evocative repetition of hand images are the final pictures with which Porter leaves her reader. No other image in this essay works as well as a metaphor for the suffering of the Mexican indigenous population than the work-stained hands Porter observes.

Porter uses images of hands similarly throughout “María Concepción.” This time, they are not the hands of pilgrims, but they are the working hands of María Concepción and her husband Juan. There are at least eleven references to hands in this story: hands hold or use tools, they hold a knife, they are strong hands, hands seizing hands, blood-stained hands, half-awake hands. María’s hands are the first mentioned although the word “hands” is not mentioned. Porter describes an action that creates a vivid visual image of María’s hands, an image that would repeat several times—that of María using a knife. In the first instance, she is slicing the neck of the bird Givens will cook for his lunch, pulling its head off “with a casual firmness she might use with the top of a beet” (7). It’s impossible to envision this episode without seeing María’s hands performing this action, from which Givens recoils. The second time Porter mentions María’s hands, Juan has

returned from fighting in the revolution with his lover, María Rosa. In Juan's absence, María Concepción's baby was born and has died. Now, she is depicted not as an indigenous Madonna but as "gaunt," and in spite of her deteriorated condition, she worked even harder, "her butchering knife was scarcely ever out of her hand" (10), connecting this image to the initial image of her killing the bird, and it anticipates the murder of María Rosa.

When Juan returns, it is Givens who gets him out of being imprisoned and possibly executed for desertion by the local military police and to thank him, Juan "seized Givens' hand and burst into oratory" (11), an oratory of elaborate, obsequious praise, playing the fool to placate Givens, his colonizer "chief." At this point, it is María who assumes the role of executioner by stabbing Juan's lover to death before returning to their home where she faces Juan with "the long knife she wore habitually...in her hand" (14). Her hands are blood-stained and stiffen on Juan's arms when he tries to comfort her by holding her head between his hands (14, 15). He encourages her to wash her hands, and after that, she returns to her domestic role and fans the cook fire in their home with now "strong hands." It's as if by taking unprecedented action in killing Juan's lover, María's hands become strong while then Juan's become "half-awake hands" (21). Her hands, washed of María Rosa's murder, can return to domestic work, which now includes taking care of María Rosa's baby, who she has claimed as her own. This act restores her to her Madonna status, and at the end of the story, she sits with the child in her lap, a Pictorialist image of domestic harmony, bathed by the soft light in the silver air.

If only by examining her textual snapshots of hands, it's clear that Porter uses these images to establish María Concepción as an indigenous female who takes control of

her life, and through that control Porter claims agency, perhaps because that was something Porter felt lacking in her own life. María is able to step out of “her place” in the domestic sphere to establish herself as a figure who can command her own life, much like Porter portrays the Indians in “Xochimilco.” The Indians in “Xochimilco” are described as natural, as instinctual, as able to live independently of the colonizing culture. María demonstrates she can also live independently from the domination of men, though she chooses to remain in the domestic sphere by the end of the story but on her terms. This is a role rarely afforded to women in Mexican culture, indigenous or otherwise. Porter’s hope was that in the post-revolutionary era, the elevation of arts and education would also extend to equitable rights for women. American women like Porter and Modotti could and did live outside Mexican gender norms with an unprecedented freedom that wasn’t necessarily extended to American women in American culture. They both assumed multiple lovers while engaging in activist and artistic activities, leading their lives dictated by no one but themselves, but those rights were not afforded to Mexican women. Porter complicates the Mexican cultural response to gender norms though.

On one hand, María refers to Juan’s lover as a whore who has “no right to live” (6), and it is for her sexual transgression that she is murdered. On the other hand, his lover, María Rosa, fought alongside him in the revolution as a *soldadera*,<sup>8</sup> a role also outside accepted gender norms, except that Porter describes María Rosa’s revolutionary activities as mainly performing a supporting role caring for her soldier lover, making dinners, collecting guns, ammunition, and other valuables from the dead after battles, though not all *soldaderas* were domestic camp followers, some took up arms, some led

both men and women into battle. María Rosa is not arrested by the military police for desertion, but is given a more severe punishment by the knife-wielding, laboring hand of María Concepción, stabbed to death for being the cause of Juan deserting María Concepción. While Modotti did not produce an image of a knife-wielding hand, she would eventually produce many poignant photographs of the hands of working class and indigenous individuals, perhaps influenced by Porter's emphasis on textual images of such hands. At the very least, both writer and photographer shared an emphasis on the symbolic weight of working-class people's hands.

The same is true of the hand images in Porter's short story, "Hacienda." "Hacienda" is Porter's most pessimistic representation of Mexico and the failures of the Mexican revolution with regard to its working class and indigenous population, and that is reflected not only in her use of photographic references, photographic language and in her use of fictional photographs, it's also evident in her use of hand images, images that are a strong focus of some of Modotti's most important photographs. Part of how Porter's pessimism registers is in the contrast between the hands of the working and indigenous class and the hands of wealthy Mexicans and white Americans and Europeans. Porter used this contrast in "The Fiesta of Guadalupe" to criticize the Catholic church's failings in their treatment of Mexico's indigenous population by comparing the artificial, ineffectual hands of the statue of Mary to the rough, work-stained hands of her indigenous Mexican supplicants. In "Hacienda," the first hands mentioned are those of the porter, described by the effete American Kennerly as "filthy paws" that communicate infection (137). The next image of hands comes in the form of one of the photographs in Andreyev's folder and seems to invoke one of Modotti's most poignant images.

When Porter’s narrator describes the camera as capturing “figures under a doom...suffering” she mentions an image in the folder that reveals that suffering through a photograph of “clasped hands” (142). These are not the clasped hands of the Virgin’s statue in “Fiesta.” For Porter, those clasped hands represented the suffering and death that marked the lives of the indigenous in the wake of the revolution, a revolution that failed to improve their lives and kept them in a feudal state of servitude like the Indians working in the hacienda. Modotti’s camera captured such figures as well. While Weston was photographing nude pictures of Modotti and producing his iconic images of shells, peppers, and toilets, Modotti stepped away from the focus of Weston’s lens to take her place behind her own camera and wandered among the ordinary people, portraying the human details of their gritty, hardworking lives, as in this image of hands resting on a



Fig. 33 *Hands Resting on Tool*, Tina Modotti, 1927  
©Getty Museum, Los Angeles

tool handle (fig. 33). Modotti, however, doesn’t insert any pessimism into this image. She presents the reality of the working class through the dirt visible on these hands resting on a handle that could belong to any manual, dirt-wielding implement like a shovel or a hoe. She also reveals a dignity in the way the hands rest upon each other, not like the pristine but ineffectual hands of Mary’s statue. These are strong, capable, earthy hands



accustomed to hard work. They are the hands of the worker who is helping to rebuild a nation. Part of Modotti's gendered aesthetic was to use her camera to present indigenous women as individuals worth seeing by creating an image where working hands are a symbol that speak for an individual as well as for a class of people in that "they represent the potential political power vested in the *campesinos* and *trabajadores*" (Lowe 36). However, while the viewer may assume the hands are masculine because of the tool they rest upon, Adams suggests that with closer examination, "the blurred background of cloth...suggests a Mexican woman's belt-seamed and pleated shift" (43), meaning these are a woman's hands.

It is this image of hands resting on a tool that provides the best example to differentiate between Weston's aesthetic and Modotti's gendered aesthetic. Weston



Fig. 34 *Hands, Mexico*, Edward Weston, 1924  
©Center for Creative Photography, Board of Regents

photographed Modotti's hands, one resting upon the other against a cloth background printed with what appears to be a Japanese design. Unlike the hands of the laborer, hers are slender and clean. Adams refers to them as "do-nothing fingers" (45) as compared to the rough, dirty hands of the woman laborer. Weston, presents his disembodied part of

Modotti as a fragment of an exotic “other.” In another of Weston’s photos, one where Modotti is nude, the cloth that she lies next to is identified as a kimono and has the same pattern on it as in the image of just her hands, making those hands seem more ornamental than useful. They are a part of an object of desire. Modotti’s gendered aesthetic presents a laborer’s hands that work to survive, a woman’s hands that are not ornamental. As marginalized as she may be, Modotti depicts a woman laborer’s hands as instruments working to help change a nation.

Porter may have had this image of Modotti’s in mind when she then created the contrasting hand images that dominate “Hacienda,” the “filthy paws” of the indigenous laborers with those of the individuals involved in making a film about Mexico that would never depict the truth of Mexico and its people after the revolution. As Modotti’s hands create a portrait of the working class, Porter’s hands in “Hacienda” also create a portrait of the individuals and the class of people upon whom Porter focused her deadly gaze. Beginning with Kennerly, Porter describes his hands as “officious” in the way he tries to tuck in the narrator’s skirts around her in the carriage that will take them from the train to the hacienda, probably, as the narrator claims, “to keep a thread of my garments from touching the no doubt infections foreign things facing us” (149) communicated through the “filthy paws” of porters and the indigenous travelers. Next, Porter presents the hands of Betancourt, a Mexican official assigned to make sure “nothing hurtful to the national dignity got in the way of the foreign cameras” (146). The character of Betancourt is actually based on Adolfo Best-Maugard, the Mexican painter and artist in Greenwich Village who first enticed Porter to go to Mexico. Best-Maugard was at the hacienda as one of the Mexican government advisors (censors) assigned to Eisenstein’s film project

when Porter visited (Alvarez 12). Portraying his hands as she does demonstrates a level of pessimism that deepened between her first arrival in Mexico and her visit to Hacienda Tetlapayac. Once a champion of art and aesthetics during the initial bloom of the cultural renaissance, Best-Maugard in the character of Betancourt is now depicted as waving away “[b]eggars, the poor, the deformed, the old and ugly” or all those things not worth seeing, and hence, not worth filming. He waves them all away with “a narrow, pontifical hand” not unlike the priests who attend to but fail to help the working class and indigenous population, a hand that waves away “vulgar human pity which always threatened, buzzing like fly at the edges of his mind” (152). It is this pretentious, even callous gesture that Porter later describes as coming from “too-beautiful slender hands” that wave upon “insubstantial wrists” when compared to the hands of a successful Mexican poet-songwriter also involved in the film, Carlos Montana, who beats time on a table with the handle of his spoon while he sings before he shakes the narrator’s hands. Montana seems to represent Mexican culture that was once vibrant, “he had composed half the popular songs in Mexico,” which evokes the presence of the songs Porter included in “Xochimilco.” However, Montana is now viewed by the likes of the man with “pontificating hands” on “insubstantial wrists” as a failure. Instead, Porter mocks the man who first introduced her to the Mexican cultural renaissance as a failure by insisting he “has compromised his artistic calling for wealth” by acting as a cultural censor for the Mexican government (Alvarez 12). Porter accomplishes this by having the character Betancourt assert that wealth “is the unobtrusive companion of all true success” (*Collected Stories* 159), which, along with the aura of death around the hacienda, exemplifies the culture of corruption that has replaced a once vibrant cultural renaissance.

Kennerly is equally ineffectual as his officious hands have become “wobbling” as they try to clear away a cloud of flies (163), using the presence of flies as a an indicator of the cultural decay she witnessed, a cloud that cannot be cleared with wobbling hands. It is significant that the only hands the narrator touches are those of the poet-songwriter, who sang of Mexico and its people. Montana is still able to sing, but he is now a hack actor in a failed film, a detail Porter includes as if to acknowledge that ten years after her arrival in Mexico, that life of the cultural renaissance has been squelched or waved away by pontificating, wobbling, officious hands of the post-revolution Mexican government that once sought to encourage such a renaissance.

Given their use of a shared visual grammar such as hands, it seems possible that the textual images Porter created, particularly those of the indigenous working class, could have influenced Modotti’s vision, informing the focus of her camera. “The Fiesta of Guadalupe” appeared in 1920 in *El Herald*, a year before Tina Modotti’s first appearance in Mexico, and three years before Modotti would return to Mexico with photographer Edward Weston to live, to work and to become a photographer as well. Not long after Porter’s essay was published, her editorship of the English language section of *El Herald* ended when the supplement was canceled, but during that brief time, Porter used her column to raise money for charitable causes (Unrue 76). Given the short duration of Porter’s stint on this publication, it seems unlikely that Modotti would have been able to read Porter’s essay unless Porter or someone else provided a copy. In addition, Porter left Mexico twice, returning to the United States before being invited back by the Mexican government in 1922 in order to work on a monograph for the exhibit of Mexican folk art that would open in Los Angeles in 1922. Modotti was living

in Los Angeles at that time, and Modotti's biographer Argentero asserts that Modotti contributed to the exhibition catalogue Porter edited, although Modotti's contribution is not specified (61). Returning to Mexico again in 1923 to work on another project, Stout claims, "it was probably during this stay that Porter met another of her many radical/artistic friends, the strikingly beautiful Italian-American Tina Modotti" (55). One could reasonably assume that Modotti may have become familiar with Porter's work, particularly considering they had friends in common, traveled in the same circles of writers and artists, like Diego Rivera, even if Modotti would not begin creating her own images independent of Weston's influence until 1924.

Porter was aware of Modotti's work when she commented on Modotti's photographs in her review of Anita Brenner's *Idols Behind Altars* in 1929. In her review, she not only mentions Modotti specifically, she addresses the shared images that figured importantly in both their work: images of hands. Similar to Porter's review of Rivera's mural, commenting on his poi Porter's review titled, "Old Gods and New Messiahs," she declares, "the laboring hand is esteemed a thing of marvelous beauty." She then produces a list of hands reminiscent of the hands listed in her essay: "great hands of war clasped over a sword hilt; hands grasping a machete, molding a pot; wearing, digging in the mines, delving in the earth, scattering the seeds; this laboring hand became a vast basic symbol" (*This Strange, Old World and Other Book Reviews by Katherine Anne Porter* 87). Porter continues to state that "Tina Modotti, an Italian, makes photographs of hands and has made a beautiful study of the hands of Amado Galván (fig. 35), the potter, for this book" (87), although in *Idols Behind Altars*, this image is credited to Weston, raising a question about whether this image was, in fact, Modotti's. At this point, Modotti was



Fig. 35 *Hand of Amado Galván*, Edward Weston, 1925-1926  
©Susan Herzig & Paul Hertzmann, Inc., San Francisco

just beginning to produce her own work, but one could argue that given how the hands of working people would become such an important element in her photography, a motif she and Porter shared, this image may have been wrongly attributed to Weston.

From 1924-1930, Modotti created photographs of the Mexican people and culture while also making a living as a portrait photographer (as did Käsebier and Gilpin). One of the many notable literary figures she photographed during this time was writer, John Dos Passos, who visited Mexico between 1926-1927. Long before he would pen the observation that American culture was moving from being wordminded to being eyeminded, Dos Passos traveled to Mexico because, like Porter, he was interested in Mexico's post-revolution cultural renaissance, where artists such as Modotti were creating new ways of seeing that he deemed vital to American culture. Dos Passos also went to Mexico because he was "hoping to meet peasants whose lives have been transformed by the Revolution—the type of citizens portrayed in Rivera's murals—who could tell him about land reform, revolutionary politics, and socialist art" (Gallo 330). Tina Modotti was such an artist whose photography was documenting the very people Dos Passos hoped to meet.

Edward Weston describes in his *Daybooks* a letter he received from Modotti in 1927 that mentions Dos Passos, who had “called to see our photographs,--she [Modotti] has a few of mine.” This indicates that Dos Passos was aware of their work. In addition, Weston quotes Modotti’s letter: “To quote, ‘He like all keen persons appreciates photography as it should be’” (volume 2, “California” 5). Photography as it should be, as Modotti declared in her piece published in *Mexican Folkways*, is a medium that creates honest images, “without distortions or manipulations,” which required a keen eye to capture those things worth seeing, like the indigenous laborers, the women, and the children Porter described in her writing. Modotti’s eyeminded, photographic aesthetic impressed and possibly informed Dos Passos’s observation about American culture needing such a new way of seeing. It could be argued that Modotti and the emotional quality of her images may have been the inspiration for Dos Passos’s “camera eye” sections in his *U.S.A. Trilogy*, sections that work like cinematic flashes of ordinary life sandwiched between segments representing a larger historical context, much like Modotti’s images.

When Dos Passos wrote a piece on his experiences in post-revolution Mexico, he created a pessimistic portrait of it similar to Porter’s. He described those the revolution failed, like the pilgrims in church “on their knees painfully dragging themselves across the floor towards the Virgin Who Gives Help” (316) and like the Indian laborer with “old wornout sandals, a dusty silent man in whitish rags,” a peon “with his eyes on the ground” (315), textual images not unlike what Porter created and not unlike many of the photographs Modotti produced (fig. 32). Modotti photographed Dos Passos by presenting

him somewhat comically as a tall, American political tourist in a suit who is surrounded by shorter Indian figures in traditional Mexican dress, even though he is depicted as



Fig. 36 *Portrait of John Dos Passos*, Tina Modotti, c. 1927  
©George Eastman House

wearing the mantle of a culture not his own. Indeed, one of his Mexican travelling companions on this trip, Mexican poet and playwright Salvado Novo, took Dos Passos to task for his treatment of Mexico as “an exotic land” and Mexicans as “the exotic other” (Gallo 334). In addition, as further evidence of playful mocking, Modotti misspelled his name on the print and included an arrow identifying him as an “other as” seen from the perspective of the Mexicans who surround him.

Modotti knew what it was like to be depicted as an “other” herself as she was initially viewed as an exotic Italian femme fatale, particularly as Weston’s nude photographs of her were exhibited publicly with his other images. On the other hand, when Modotti depicted the indigenous Mexican men and women, it was with a remarkable sensitivity, often placing a visual emphasis on their “marvelous” beautiful laboring hands, portraying both what those hands “do, or don’t do” (Folgarait 64).



Sometimes the hands are holding tools (fig. 33), vessels (fig. 30), babies (fig. 31), the strings of a marionette (fig. 40), washing clothes (fig. 29), dangling idly or simply holding each other (fig. 32). The relaxed, spontaneous feel of these images communicates an exchange of gazes. The intimacy evident in Modotti's images suggests a connection between the photographer and her subjects. In Modotti's image of an Indian woman breastfeeding her baby (fig. 37), there seems to be an especially tender, intimate connection featuring the depiction of a baby's hand on her mother's breast. Some scholars (Albers) suggest the woman may be Luz Jiménez, an indigenous Nahua woman who worked for one of Modotti's friends and who modeled for Diego Rivera among other artists. Images like this one and fig. 31, depicting a pregnant Tenhuantepec Indian woman holding her child, evoke the maternal images with which Porter framed "María Concepción," except Modotti's images were not created using the Pictorialist style photographing her indigenous subjects. Other scholars maintain that because Modotti was not Mexican or indigenous, "photography both tied her closely to the condition and fate



Fig. 37 *Baby Nursing*, Tina Modotti, c. 1926-27  
©Museum of Modern Art, New York

of these people but also necessarily alienated her from them” (Folgarait 51), yet it is clear that Modotti was no ghost among her indigenous subjects, as was Porter among the pilgrims. She made a connection with those she photographed, not using her camera aggressively. While photographing the Tehuana Indian women in Oaxaca, she left it up to her subjects whether or not to engage in an exchange of gazes, though “the women sometimes flashed smiles while they were known to throw stones at men” (Albers 223). Modotti, as did Porter, also donned Tehuana Indian garb, but her intent behind having herself photographed in it differed from Porter. Porter used indigenous garb as a way to claim agency through the Indians she used as subjects in her writing, absorbing their characteristics she felt she lacked. Modotti took a self-portrait in Tehuana costume because “in picturing herself in ‘quintessentially Mexican’ dress, the photographer declares a deep and abiding identification with the country” (224), which transcends just



Fig. 38 *Self-Portrait*, Tina Modotti, c. 1929  
[server.fhp.uoregon.edu/dtu/sites/kahlo/images/fktinateh.html](http://server.fhp.uoregon.edu/dtu/sites/kahlo/images/fktinateh.html)  
This image also appears on the back cover of Albers’s biography of Modotti.

claiming agency. Here, too, the hand of the photographer on her shoulder draws the viewer's attention, a gesture that makes it seem as if she is about to wave. Albers found this image "while researching for a book on Modotti." She "went to Oregon to meet the family of her subject's first husband...The family directed Albers to their attic, where she found two crates packed with papers, letters, telegrams - and some original photographs and contact sheets that had never before been seen in public" (Baker). Albers goes so far as to assert that this image serves as Modotti's "spiritual passport, and a talisman of her love for the Mexican people" (224) as she took this self-portrait not long before she was deported.

Other images involving hand imagery Modotti considered worth seeing are less bucolic and communicate a darker story more overtly critical of the failures of the post-revolutionary Mexican government when it came to the wellbeing of the indigenous population. "Misery" (fig. 39), a more overt, unflinching depiction of the suffering of the working class in the wake of a revolution that failed them, it is the hand of the horizontal figure, and what it is not doing, that draws the viewer's eyes to it immediately, as if



Fig. 39 *Misery*, Tina Modotti, 1928  
©Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany

beckoning the viewer to bear witness to this misery. Adding emphasis to the outflung hand is the shrouded female figure who is bending toward and appearing to gaze upon the prone figure. In this image, Modotti reminds the viewer that while there are working class hands capable of rebuilding a nation, there are also hands that reflect the suffering unallayed by the post-revolutionary government. The figure itself is framed by the seated, hunched and shrouded woman on the left, whose posture and position points to this central figure. On the right, the line of the figure's legs draws the viewer's eyes to the dark entrance to a bar, or market through which the viewer can see figures who have their back turned to this misery. While this photograph is less symbolic than Modotti's images of workers' hands, her deadly female accuracy of vision, her photographic eye is wide awake and presents a picture much darker than any of Porter's textual images of pilgrims and it's one from which it's difficult to look away.

Finally, the hands of the puppeteer, an artist Modotti knew well, emphasize the tangle that Mexican politics had become and “underlines the enduring attraction to Modotti of an art that makes its point by metaphor and association rather than with dry



Fig. 40 *Hands of the Puppeteer*, Tina Modotti, 1929  
©The Minneapolis Institute of Art

facts or blunt propagandizing” (Lowe 43). These, too, are working hands that also symbolized the tangle between politics and art that Modotti had difficulty reconciling. After Modotti joined the Communist Party in 1927, many of the images she produced appeared more journalistic, more political, published in both *Mexican Folkways* and the newspaper “oriented toward peasants and workers” (Argentero 51), *El Machete*. She began to feel a tension between her life as an artist and her life as an activist. The energy she felt that was required to aid in the problems of living left less inspiration for her to continue creating her art. While other women of her time struggled with the issues of maintaining lives as artists when gender norms dictated they prioritize their lives as wives and mothers, Modotti felt a pull to dedicate her energy to what she referred to as “the problems of life” (Hooks 114). Part of this tension she attributed to being a woman. In a letter to Weston quoted by Hooks, she claimed women were negative, and she seems to agree with Frank Norris in claiming they lacked the capacity “to be wholly absorbed by one thing” (114). However, she immediately admits to generalizing and declares this was a problem specific to her and stated “I cannot...solve the problem of life by losing myself in the problem of art” (115). As such, Modotti was still reaching well beyond gender norms and, like Leonard Folgarait, we can consider that “feminism is a good term to describe the behavior of one who escapes the social constructions of gender expectations and finds that her intellect, art, sex, and social aspirations are enough to drive her being” (117), even though that drive seemed to create a divide between her life problems and her art.

Indeed, Modotti’s life problems would increase when, in January of 1929, her lover and fellow Communist Party member, Julio Mella, was murdered at her side in the

street, bleeding to death in her arms (Modotti was originally accused of but acquitted of his murder). While Porter reported on the aura of death at Hacienda Tetlapayac, Modotti experienced it directly. The Mexican government viewed her as a femme fatale (because of the sensational reception of Weston's nude photos of her and her proximity to Mella's assassination) and as a political outsider. This event, along with the Mexican government's suspicion that she was involved in the plot to assassinate Mexico's new president in 1929, ultimately contributed to her abrupt deportation from Mexico in 1930 after having her first and only solo exhibition of her photographs in Mexico. She produced fewer photographs after she left Mexico and is known primarily for the work she did there.

While Katherine Anne Porter continued to write after her experiences in Mexico, continuing her use of a gendered photographic aesthetic in stories like "Old Mortality," Tina Modotti began to take fewer photographs after her expulsion from Mexico. The photographs in her one and only solo exhibition functioned as her photographic poem to Mexico, like the textual, ultimately cynical poem Porter produced in her work. Both artists' work was informed by a deadly accurate female vision and a photographic eye wide awake. Through that deadly accurate female vision coupled with the use of a gendered photographic aesthetic, both Modotti and Porter expressed empathy for the Mexican, indigenous subjects presented in their work. Porter championed the introduction of their art and culture to American culture through the exhibition. Porter claiming agency through them seemed designed to not only depict them as examples of primitive vitality, but also to fill in those areas in her own life lacking in that vitality. As mentioned previously, Adams states "Porter's indigenism landed her in a contradictory

position. On the one hand, she recognized that the renaissance was responsible for introducing the best of Mexico's popular culture to the world," but the Indian's exposure to contemporary, post-revolution culture had a corrosive effect on them, and she witnessed a revolution failing the people it was supposed to help (*Continental Divides* 117, 118), limiting her exchange of gazes with them. On the other hand, Modotti's own experience as an object of the male gaze lead to her using her camera differently than photographers like Weston as she connected to her subjects through an exchange of gazes that allowed her to photograph intimate images of marginalized indigenous Mexicans, particularly indigenous women. Unlike Weston, "Her images attest to, rather than resist, a relationship between photographer and subject." Because her passion to elevate the indigenous and working class as subjects worth seeing, she used her camera as a "device for intervening in, rather than mastering the surrounding area" (137). Porter's work offered both sharp observations ("The Fiesta of Guadalupe" and "Hacienda") as well as romantic views of Mexican indigenous culture ("Xochimilco" and "María Concepción"), but her work was not used as a device for intervening directly on behalf of her indigenous subjects, as Modotti did (publishing her photographs in *El Machete*), though Porter was instrumental in introducing Mexican art and culture to American culture. Nevertheless, Porter's and Modotti's work intersected for a brief, but powerful moment as part of a trans-American cohort that sought to "represent the concerns of indigenous and working people" and to share their art and culture with broader audiences (148). As a result, the web of connection between them at a time of pivotal change in Mexico provided the space within which they developed a new way of seeing that also created their identities as artists.

Most importantly, their legacy can also be tracked through the work of the artists they influenced. Porter acted as a mentor to and provided inspiration for writer Eudora Welty, another Southern writer who was also a photographer and who would also eventually earn a Pulitzer Prize in fiction. Modotti's work inspired the work of her friend, Lola Alvarez Bravo, one of Mexico's first woman photographers to become known in artistic circles in North America, although not the first Mexican woman photographer. Bravo's husband, Manuel Alvarez Bravo who, like Weston was for Modotti, was Lola's initial mentor. In addition, Modotti also became the inspiration for a biographical novel about her by Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska, *Tinísima*, published in 1992. In this biographical novel, Poniatowska uses a gendered, photographic aesthetic to create a new way of seeing Modotti's life and work by combining history, fiction, and Modotti's photographs within one text. One can even see Modotti's influence in the work of contemporary Mexican photographer, Graciela Iturbide, who was also mentored by Manuel Alvarez Bravo and who photographed many of the indigenous communities that Modotti photographed.

Though Porter enjoys less attention, contemporary novelist and short story writer Alice McDermitt extolled Porter's mastery in an interview with Melissa Block on National Public Radio in 2006. McDermitt laments Porter's lack of exposure in university classrooms: "Katherine Anne Porter herself wrote that the arts are what we find again when the ruins are cleared away. We discard voices such as hers at our peril." Conversely, Modotti seems to be gaining more exposure in contemporary culture in Mexico and elsewhere. In addition to her influence on Iturbide's work (Modotti is just one of the photographers who influenced Iturbide's work), parts of her life and work have



translated into film. In addition to Modotti appearing as a character (played by actress Ashley Judd) in *Frida* (2002), the movie about painter Frida Kahlo, there is also a six-part series in development called “Radical Eye: The Life and Times of Tina Modotti.” The miniseries is to be filmed in Italy, Los Angeles, and Mexico, and directed by London-based husband and wife team Aaron Brookner and Paula Vaccaro (Nick Vivarelli for *Variety Magazine*). Italian actress Monica Bellucci has been cast to play Modotti, a role “that Bellucci has wanted to play for years.” It is clear that the seminal work each artist created during their participation in the trans-American cohort in Mexico, where they forged their identities as artists, continues to resonate within the community of women artists.

## Chapter 4

### **The Devil and Good Women: Julia Peterkin, Doris Ulmann, and *Roll, Jordan, Roll***

While the examination of influences between photographers and writers such as Gilpin, Cather, Modotti and Porter point to a shared gendered, photographic aesthetic, the influences between these artists were mostly tangential, the artists were connected through shared interests in geography, shared visual grammar, and through their varied approaches to a transcultural exchange with their non-subjects. The collaboration between Gertrude Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá on Zitkála-Šá's portraits and Käsebier's encouragement of her writing indicates a direct relationship between writer and photographer that influenced their individual work. Modotti and Porter worked on the same catalog for the exhibit of Mexican art in Los Angeles. While they never collaborated directly, Gilpin and Cather shared a love for western and southwestern culture and landscape, and Cather's novels were an undeniable influence on Gilpin's photography. However, aside from these varying degrees of influences, there is only one known collaboration between a woman writer and a woman photographer in the beginning of the twentieth century combining photographs and texts—the one between photographer Doris Ulmann and writer Julia Peterkin. Laura Gilpin produced her own volumes combining her images with the text she authored, but Peterkin and Ulmann collaborated directly on a unique project, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, which documented the lives of southern, rural African Americans, focusing on the Gullah community living and working on Peterkin's plantation in South Carolina. Ulmann had produced many photographs throughout the South, but in 1933, she "agreed to let Robert Ballou publish a book of her photographs of southern African Americans," but it was "her desire that this

book be a collaborative effort between herself and Julia Peterkin and that Peterkin provide the text for the book” (Jacobs 124). Publisher and book designer Ballou then reached out to Peterkin and asked her “to write a sketch about each one” (125) because she knew many of Ulmann’s African American subjects.

Peterkin had written and published many stories and novels based on these subjects. Borrowing a phrase from one of Peterkin’s letters quoted by her biographer, Peterkin described a strong, Gullah woman on whom the character of Mary was based in her Pulitzer-winning novel, *Scarlet Sister Mary*, as “a devil and a good woman too” (Williams 110), indicating she viewed Mary as a complex individual rather than a racial stereotype. The same phrase could be used to describe Peterkin and Ulmann. They pushed back against gender norms at that time, against the stereotype of domestic, cultured, American white women to become successful artists, both “good” women negotiating a sometimes contentious friendship while working on a project that required grappling with the devil in the form of problematic exchanges involving race and class between them and their subjects. To that end, each applied a gendered photographic aesthetic in varying degrees to their work on this project, a project involving not only an exchange of gazes between artists and subjects, but also an exchange between two different art forms. Further, within the space of that exchange between image and text, a subtext appears to emerge that isn’t evident in the text alone. It is this combination of elements that warrants a close, detailed reading of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, a groundbreaking collaboration, which sets this work apart from similar projects that would follow.

One of the first, yet still little-known collaborations of its kind, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* was published in 1933, two years before the next collaboration between a woman writer

and woman photographer would appear in 1935. *Cabins in the Laurel* featured Muriel Earley Shepard's text about a North Carolina mountain community and the photographs were created by Bayard Wooten. Four years later, writer Erskine Caldwell and *Life Magazine* photographer Margaret Bourke-White would collaborate to create another study of the South, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937). Photographer Dorothea Lange and her husband Paul Taylor also created a similar collaboration, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939) where Lange provided the images and Taylor, wrote the accompanying text. At that time, Lange and Taylor were working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA),<sup>9</sup> for which their book was created. Designed to document the rural poverty of the Great Depression, they concentrated on American farm and field workers, people driven by economic deprivation who migrated to California in search of work. Similarly, the collaboration between Caldwell and Bourke-White documented the lives of rural, sharecroppers all over the Deep South, and their work inspired the more well-known project produced for *Fortune* magazine by photographer Walker Evans (who also did work for the FSA) and writer James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which appeared in 1941 and also documented the lives of poor, southern tenant farmers. Such projects, whether funded by the FSA or created as personal projects, were meant to draw attention to their subjects' lives and culture. All of these projects, in spite of their benevolent intent, were problematic in terms of both race and class as the photographers and writers were all white and middle to upper-class while and they were documenting the lives of marginalized Others including both white and African American members of the poor and working classes. *You Have Seen Their Faces* and *An American Exodus* depicted the conditions of both working class whites and blacks. Even though *Let Us*

*Now Praise Famous Men* contains an image of rural, working class African Americans, the text focuses on three white tenant farmers and their families. *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, created by Ulmann and Peterkin, differed from the other projects in that it was the only collaboration that focused solely on rural, working class African Americans, this project differed from the others in other important ways.

Another difference between Ulmann's and Peterkin's collaboration and similar collaborations is it was not a government project (their project predates the formation of the FSA), or a project produced for a magazine. Ulmann and Peterkin, too, felt the importance of documenting the lives of the southern, rural working class, focusing mainly on the members of the Gullah<sup>10</sup> culture living and working on Julia Peterkin's plantation. However, long before they collaborated on *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, both had pursued their interest in this kind of documentation, Ulmann with her photographs and Peterkin in her fiction. It's possible their friendship, which began around 1929, was based on this common interest. Another commonality between Ulmann and Peterkin that differed from the artists involved in the FSA and magazine projects is they were "not concerned with effecting social change" by design, as were the FSA projects (Davidov 185). Rather, Ulmann "sought instead to document what existed, to make a photographic record that would become a lasting memory of certain aspects of American life" (Featherstone 33). That said, Ulmann was not merely a documentary photographer because "[w]hat informs these portraits is a sensitive portrayal of character and human worth" (33) that is rendered with a Pictorialist sensibility involving a soft focus on its subjects, as in the work of Gertrude Käsebier and Laura Gilpin, combined with a

modernist sense of composition, also applied by Gertrude Käsebier, Laura Gilpin, and Tina Modotti.

On the other hand, while Peterkin may not have been writing to effect a change in the way African Americans were treated in the South, she differs from the other writers discussed here as well as the writers collaborating on projects similar to *Roll, Jordan, Roll* in her inclusion of strong Gullah characters telling their own stories and speaking in their own unique dialect. This was groundbreaking at the time, especially because she was a white woman writing complex, non-stereotypical black characters who were speaking in their own dialect on the page (*Green Thursday* was published in 1924). In addition, Peterkin never suggested in her narratives that African-American plantation workers were mistreated or that working and living conditions for southern blacks in general needed to change, thereby dodging addressing the very real issue of race and class in the Jim Crow South. Indeed, unlike in her novels, her tone in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* rings at times with a stereotypical paternalism—rhetoric used by the white, plantation class to justify their authority over African Americans by claiming slaves or descendants of slaves, are like happy children who are better off being dominated by whites, but the juxtaposition of her text with Ulmann's photographs (which will be examined in greater detail) offers a different way of interpreting her text.

In addition to the differences previously mentioned, the most notable difference between *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and similar projects is that this is the first collaboration produced by two women (though *Cabins in the Laurel* would appear in 1935) focusing solely on African American, primarily Gullah, subjects. Both Peterkin and Ulmann approached this project with previous demonstrated successes. Ulmann was an

established New York portrait photographer whose work was included in exhibits alongside Tina Modotti's images. Peterkin enjoyed notoriety and respect as a writer of the Southern Renaissance<sup>11</sup> who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1929, the same year she met Ulmann, for her novel *Scarlet Sister Mary*, a fictional biography loosely based on the life of a Gullah woman, Mary Weeks, a worker on her plantation. Even though other photographers and writers focused on indigenous, marginalized cultures (Käsebier, Gilpin, Modotti), before the FSA projects, few photographers or writers focused on marginalized, southern rural African-American cultures as subjects for literature or for fine art photography. Peterkin's work appeared at the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance with the publication of her short story collection, *Green Thursday*, in 1924, just as African Americans and the cultural production surrounding them became vogue and in demand for white consumption, much like what happened with the Native American culture at the turn of the century, a topic concerning the work of Gertrude Käsebier and Zitkála-Šá.

Another important difference between *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and similar projects lies in the fact that unlike any of the other writers discussed here, Peterkin lived with her subjects, albeit as the mistress of the plantation. While Käsebier had personal relationships with the Native Americans she photographed, while Gilpin developed relationships with her Navaho subjects through her companion, while both Katherine Anne Porter and Tina Modotti briefly lived in Mexico where they wrote about and photographed indigenous Mexicans, Peterkin witnessed and participated in the Gullahs' day-to-day routine nearly all her life. She watched their activities, worked with them, nursed them and was nursed by them, and she listened to their language and their stories.

Even though James Agee lived with some of the sharecroppers (albeit very briefly) while gathering stories for *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, he was always an outsider fulfilling an assignment. Peterkin was an insider in Gullah culture to an extent, but even that connection was problematized by race and class differences.

Finally, unlike many women photographers, and specifically the ones discussed previously in this study, Ulmann didn't depend on her work as a photographer to make a living. Though her foray into photography began as a hobby (Jacobs 17), her work was driven, not by the urgency to provide for herself or a family (Ulmann had married but remained childless), but by her passion for the art form, a passion that was supported by family wealth. This afforded her the freedom to devote her life to her work. Ulmann's husband, Dr. Charles H. Jaeger, whom she married in 1914, was also a successful photographer who supported his wife's pursuits. Even after they divorced in 1921, she continued pursuing her own work. In fact, Ulmann never charged a fee for her portraits (Davidov 186). On the other hand, while not enjoying the same financial freedom as Ulmann, Peterkin became mistress of a southern plantation when she married William Peterkin in 1903, although she didn't begin writing until later in her life. The year 1903 is auspicious as according to historian Rayford Logan because the "last decade of the nineteenth century and the opening of the twentieth century marked the nadir of the Negro's status in American society" (52), which complicates Peterkin's relationship with the African-American plantation workers she was expected to supervise. Peterkin also grappled periodically with economic downturns from failed crops and welcomed any money her writing generated, even if she, too, initially considered her writing a hobby (Williams x). However, by the time both artists collaborated on *Roll, Jordan, Roll*,



Peterkin had become a successful writer documenting the lives of the Gullah culture. Likewise, Ulmann had already demonstrated an established interest and success in producing a visual record of what she considered to be American types through her portrait projects featuring doctors, editors, and writers. Later in her career, she felt an urgency to photograph members of more marginalized American groups who she felt were in danger of vanishing: members of Shaker, Mennonite, Appalachian, and Gullah communities. Ulmann applied a gendered photographic aesthetic in creating her portraits as careful human documents, no matter who she was photographing, as did Käsebier, Gilpin, and Modotti. This was not always the case with the other projects that followed, such as *You Have Seen Their Faces*, further marking the differences between *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and similar projects.

Although Margaret Bourke-White, photographer of *You Have Seen Their Faces*, was a successful photo-journalist, one of the first women staff photographers at *Fortune* magazine and a photographer for *Life* magazine, her approach to those she photographed for *You Have Seen Their Faces* was less sympathetic and atypical of the gendered, photographic aesthetic of the photographers discussed here. For example, Bourke-White wrote in her notes to *You Have Seen Their Faces* that because there was often no electricity in the places where their subjects lived, she depended on flash bulbs to illuminate her subjects. This created an almost violent sense of intrusion. After setting up a camera in the corner of a room, which she operated by remote control, she'd wait for the gesture or expression she wanted to capture and then take their picture of her subject. She wrote that "the instant it occurred the scene was imprisoned on a sheet of film before they knew what had happened" (51). The language itself seems to indicate that she was

forcibly taking something from her subject “before they knew what happened,” as if there was little importance placed on any mutual exchange or even their willing participation in the photographic process. Ulmann, on the other hand, only photographed her subjects in natural lighting and while she often posed them, she also encouraged them to position themselves in whatever way they were most comfortable. Those who sat for her did so because they were, for the most part, participants in the photographic process, not subjects to be hunted, captured, or imprisoned on the page. Her images in all her projects demonstrate this, including those in *Roll, Jordon, Roll*, although her exchange of gazes with members of the Gullah community presented her with challenges problematized by race, class, and language differences.

Even though their collaboration set their work apart from similar projects, the challenges Ulmann and Peterkin faced in completing it necessitate an examination of their work within the historical context of race and class differences between them and their Gullah subjects. They, too, sought agency through the rural, African-American subjects like the Gullah as part of their application of a gendered photographic aesthetic. In spite of their history as slaves and hers as a white plantation mistress, Peterkin admired the strength, inner fortitude, and even fertility of Gullah women, attributes she sometimes felt she lacked, which is particularly true of fertility as Peterkin was sterilized after the birth of her one and only child. Ulmann’s agency with regard to her African American subjects differed from Peterkin’s experience in that rather than identifying with or living through individual subjects, Ulmann’s agency centered on finding meaning outside of the traditional gender rolls for women at that time by documenting groups of individuals she

felt were vanishing (Appalachian communities, Shakers, and the rural Gullah), and her images of them would be her lasting legacy.

Further, there are also aspects of their project that connected them to the movement in American culture after World War I that sought a new American identity, through identifying with a “genuine culture,” like the Gullah. Sarah Gillespie echoes Stocking when she describes this as an era where artists were “engaging in a usable American past” (23) in order to redefine “American-ness.” Although Ulmann also photographed Native Americans on the east coast, as Käsebier and Gilpin photographed Native Americans of the Southwest, Ulmann’s focus was on applying a gendered photographic aesthetic while photographing a broad array of American types occupying vanishing, marginal communities, like the Gullah and other rural southern African Americans, who she felt contributed a “usable past” in the formation of American identity. Peterkin’s fiction, on the other hand, eschewed the southern longing for the former glory of white plantation culture prior to the Civil War, glory that gave way to a bitterness after defeat and Reconstruction. Instead, her novels focused on the lives of her African-American plantation workers who formed the Gullah community. In fact, there were few white people in any of her novels, where she portrayed African-American culture as thriving independently of white culture, portrayals that rankled the members of her own plantation class. After the publication of her first collection of short stories, *Green Thursday*, featuring strong Gullah characters, Williams notes that for Peterkin, “Home felt hostile. The more strangers praised her, the more her friends and relatives bristled” (81). Even more concerning was Peterkin’s notion that “people in South Carolina (white people, that is) were attacking *Green Thursday* as ‘Negro propaganda’”

(87). However, writing about African Americans as complex human beings, using their own dialect to give them an authentic voice, also contributed to American identity, even if white southern plantation culture sought to erase or to suppress that contribution.

With regard to another aspect of a gendered photographic aesthetic, even if Peterkin didn't utilize visual language or photographic references in her narratives as did Cather and Porter, both Ulmann and Peterkin applied a gendered aesthetic as part of the web of connection. Ulmann attended the Clarence White school, as did Laura Gilpin, and maintained a Pictorialist leaning toward Modernist approach to creating images, like Gertrude Käsebier, Gilpin, and Modotti, in her use of a soft focus while incorporating a Modernist sensibility by photographing subjects from outside the traditional realm of fine art subject matter, eschewing organized tableaux depicting classical myths to capture a Gullah river baptism or men on chain gangs. And even though Ulmann's images of Native Americans are less well known, she approached photographing them, as well as members of the Gullah community, much as did Käsebier, Gilpin, and Modotti—as empathetically rendered human documents, although Modotti and Ulmann didn't identify their subjects by name, perhaps because their personal contact with their subjects was limited as compared to Käsebier and Gilpin, even though their subjects are photographed with the same empathy.

Finally, Modotti and Ulmann not only had their work appear together in exhibitions, they shared a visual grammar that included photographing hands as a modernist mode of portraiture. In Modotti's and Ulmann's work, photographs of hands at work emphasized a sense of humanity during the age when industrialization was

threatening to turn members of the working class into Faulkner’s “identityless integers,” in the United States as well as in Mexico. As stated in chapter three, portrayal of the



Fig. 33 *Hands Resting on Tool*, Tina Modotti, 1927  
@Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA



Fig. 41 *Ethel May Stiles*, Doris Ulmann, 1934, Doris Ulmann Foundation, Berea College Art Collection

bodies of members of the working class, particularly hands, became common symbols during the 1920s and 1930s as part of a “broader process of refashioning symbols and meanings...that extended from the voting booths to the factory floor and redrew the canvas of American visual culture” (Fraser 109). The use of hands as symbols also extended into Mexican art post-revolution, with hands became “a recurring motif in the American paintings of the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and Jose Clemente Orozco” (Fraser 109) as well as in the prose of Katherine Anne Porter and in Tina Modotti’s photographs. Peterkin did not share Porter’s use of hand symbolism in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, and while Ulmann’s hand portrait of Ethel May Stiles is not an image featured in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, there is still a strong visual presence of hands in the photographs that do appear in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (see fig. 41). This can be seen in the very first image in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* of the elderly man later identified as Cudjo Lewis. His old, weathered hands, one gripping the top of a cane, the other in his lap, tell this man’s story as much as his facial expression. This demonstrates that Ulmann, like Modotti, was “aware of and

potentially responding to larger trends within contemporary visual culture” (Gillespie 155).

Further, Käsebier and Ulmann belonged to the Pictorial Photographers of America, but Ulmann also established connections with other artists, especially writers, including Harlem Renaissance authors such as James Weldon Johnson, of whom she created several portraits. As Gillespie asserts, “Throughout her career, Ulmann had an abiding interest in photographing literary figures, particularly authors, and developed a reputation as an expert in this particular area of portraiture” (60). Her portraits of Johnson, however, are evidence that she was “in step with the ethos of the Harlem Renaissance that prioritized and celebrated African American experiences and contributions to society” (65), as Peterkin did in her fiction. In addition to literary figures, Ulmann also photographed artists and photographers Clarence White, Carl Van Vechten, and Mexican painter Jose Clemente Orozco. Orozco was a member of Mexico’s post-civil war cultural renaissance along with Diego Rivera, Edward Weston, Tina Modotti, and Katherine Anne Porter, and he painted a portrait of Peterkin on one of her trips to New York.

There was a similar web of connection between Peterkin and other women writers, particularly Willa Cather. Peterkin was an admirer of Cather’s work, Cather being “one Julia’s favorite writers” (Williams, *The Devil and a Good Woman, Too* 124,125) and eventually Peterkin became friends with Cather’s friend and companion, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. Scholar Elizabeth Robeson even suggests that “the misandry of *Scarlet Sister Mary*, and its textual evocations of Cather’s *My Antonia*, suggest that Sergeant’s influence may have been significant for Peterkin’s work” (776). Both Cather’s

Antonia and Peterkin's Sister Mary are strong female protagonists, women of the soil who are rooted in the land on which they live. Like Cather, Peterkin also wrote about a specific region in which she lived and the people that surrounded her, but Peterkin's text differed from Cather's given the absence of photographic references. Nevertheless, Ulmann's photographs lend an unmistakable photographic aesthetic to Peterkin's text in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* through the juxtaposition of images and text. As stated previously in this chapter, such juxtaposition allows for image and text to inform each other in an exchange of gazes not just between artists and subjects, but also between art forms, an exchange that allows a subtext to emerge. This raises questions over who, in the end, paired the texts with specific images, and who approved of the final layout of image and text. The information about the final arrangement of photographs and text is not currently known. Ulmann appeared to have been unavailable while Peterkin was assembling her text, leaving Peterkin "frustrated about her own efforts to write acceptable essays" (Jacobs 124) for the book, which suggests it may have been Peterkin who paired her text with specific images. In light of Ulmann's absence and lack of input while Peterkin was writing the text for *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Sarah Gillespie quotes from a letter Peterkin wrote at that time in which she complained, "I feel it has become my book and is only illustrated by [Doris's] pictures" (93) claiming ownership of the project. Although it remains clear how *Roll, Jordan, Roll* was assembled and who approved the final version, the presence of this subtext suggests an intentionality, very possibly Peterkin's, behind the process of deciding which text was juxtaposed with specific photographs.

Given these circumstances, it's still clear Ulmann's images were not mere illustration made to accompany Peterkin's text as others, including Peterkin, who was

frustrated and peevish over Ulmann's absence, have suggested (Landess, Featherstone). In fact, some sources believe Ulmann accumulated her images of southern, rural African Americans from several places during her travels in the South (including her visits to Peterkin's plantation, Lang Syne), intending to publish them as a book and she wanted her friend to collaborate by providing accompanying text (Jacobs 124). Some of the images of rural, southern African Americans that appeared in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* were included in her solo exhibition in New York in November of 1929 at the Delphic Studios. However, it can be argued that there is a photographic quality to the textual portraits in Peterkin's text because of the amount of detail she includes. Her narratives are "snapshots" of real people she observed around her and with whom she lived. For example, her portrayal of the "lady sexton" and her beloved ox, Sampson, offers a vivid image even without Ulmann's portrait of the sexton posing with him (this portrait is the cover image for the trade edition of *Roll, Jordan Roll*). Further, these textual snapshots are arranged throughout the book not to create a linear narrative. They are more like photographs gathered at random in a photo album. And though Peterkin does not use photographic language and metaphors like Cather and Porter, Peterkin was involved in the photographic process in the creation of some of Ulmann's images since Peterkin was instrumental in introducing Ulmann to the Gullah people and culture on her plantation.

It's not clear exactly when Ulmann and Peterkin met in or around 1928-29. Peterkin made frequent trips to New York City to visit her sister and fellow writers. Prior to their collaboration, Ulmann exhibited a passion for preserving the uniqueness and dignity of American "types," of both whites and people of color. While the term "type" communicates a sense of her subjects as the Other, at that time, a "type" was a word



commonly used to identify “members of all kinds of racial, ethnic, or closed groups, applied to white mountaineers as much as it was to southern blacks” (Gillespie 91).

Ulmann was particularly attracted to writers as photographic subjects, and she



Fig. 42 *Julia Peterkin*, Doris Ulmann, ca. 1929  
©Virginia Museum of Fine Art

photographed many prominent writers during the 1920s, including H.L. Menken, with whom Peterkin had a working relationship. Ulmann photographed Peterkin around 1929 as a dated image of the writer accompanies a chapter dedicated to Peterkin in an anthology edited by Emily Clark called *Innocents Abroad* appearing in 1931, featuring Southern writers whose work appeared in the magazine *The Reviewer*. Somewhere around the time that Ulmann photographed Peterkin, Peterkin invited Ulmann to photograph the Gullah “types” on her plantation.

There is also a portrait of both Ulmann and Peterkin dated circa 1930 (fig. 40) that is attributed to Ulmann and depicts a sense of the intimacy in their friendship. Given the date of this image, it could have been taken on one of Ulmann’s visits to Peterkin’s plantation. It is also one of the few images of Ulmann and speaks to the importance of



Fig. 43 *Doris Ulmann and Julia Peterkin*, attributed to Doris Ulmann, ca. 1929-1930  
Collection of the South Carolina Historical Society

their friendship. Though Ulmann excelled in capturing the inner essence of the individuals who sat in front of her camera, she was reluctant to be photographed, although she would later let her companion, John Jacob Niles, and photographer and patron of Harlem Renaissance, Carl Van Vechten, photograph her in 1933 and 1934 (Jacobs 282, note 42). Ulmann's biographer asserts that it was because of her friendship with Peterkin that she did something "she would not do with anyone else: pose with her for a series of photographs" (60). It's evident, as seen in fig. 43, that there was a comfortable intimacy as well mutual respect between the two artists. In keeping with Ulmann's use of portraiture to create human documents that reveal the soul of her subjects, Ulmann's friendship with Peterkin provided a rare opportunity for her to reveal her own soul. Ulmann exposes her own vulnerability in this image, which she can do because she found agency not necessarily through her subjects, but through Peterkin, herself. Jacobs explains that "Ulmann used the presence of Peterkin, the Pulitzer Prizewinner and celebrity, as well as her own furniture, dress, posture, and demeanor to

portray herself as a distinguished, sophisticated, and modern woman of means” (62). He also claims that Ulmann felt Peterkin could not only help her in photographing more American types, but that Peterkin was “the very kind of female friend with whom the photographer could be herself, who would understand both her artistic impulse and her deep need for love” (60). It’s clear in this photograph that their relationship formed the foundation upon which *Roll, Jordan, Roll* was created, in spite of claims that when they began the project, “she [Peterkin] and Doris had drifted apart” (Williams 219).

In addition to *Roll, Jordan, Roll* being one of the first collaborations of its kind, it is also an example of a project that embodied a more complicated trading of gazes with non-white subjects. While artists like Käsebier, Cather, Gilman, and Porter were considered middle-to-upper class white women, which complicated their exchanges of gazes with their marginalized subjects, Ulmann and Peterkin were both wealthy white women whose subjects for this project were poor, rural African Americans. The hundreds of Gullahs on Peterkin’s plantation worked for her and depended on the plantation for their livelihoods, as she depended on their labor to maintain the plantation and her style of living. Peterkin lived with and interacted with her plantation workers every day, and she claimed an intimacy with them and their culture, which is reflected in her writing. However, her position as their employer made any equal exchange between them problematic, though she counted a few of them among her friends, including Mary Weeks, the individual upon whom she based the character, Scarlet Sister Mary. As novelist and professor A.J. Verdelle says in Gayla Johnson’s documentary about Peterkin, *Cheating the Stillness*, the members of Peterkin’s plantation couldn’t escape her gaze because they lived with and worked for her and, willing or unwilling, their lives

provided the content for Peterkin's award-winning narratives. Hers was a complicated exchange of gazes, including a blind spot that would eventually cost Peterkin a friendship. This was not true, generally, for Ulmann.

Ulmann's photographic aesthetic was driven by the respect she felt for her subjects, no matter who they were. She photographed them where she found them. She sought out communities, like the Shakers, the Pennsylvania Dutch, and artisans in remote Appalachian hamlets, feeling "challenged to do all she could to photograph and record this vanishing generation with as much respect and dignity as she had previously documented many intellectuals and professionals in urban and industrial America" (Jacobs 56). From childhood, her father instilled in her a sense of social responsibility for those less fortunate, particularly "those unfortunate innocents who were often disregarded and mistreated in a swiftly changing American society" (4). As a young woman of eighteen, her attendance at the Ethical Culture School, which was part of the Ethical Culture Society, reinforced a sense of social responsibility whose founder, Dr. Samuel Adler, maintained a "faith in the worth of every human being" (3). As such, the bulk of her photographic career was spent "documenting the lives of people outside the mainstream" recognizing, as Adler did, that "the differences in type [of people] contribute importantly to a democratic society" (6). Therefore, for Ulmann, photographing them didn't stem solely from a need to find agency through individual subjects; rather, photographing these communities in the margins of society was an "act of intervention" (6) meant to elevate what was worth seeing, as opposed to critics who assert that she was creating "pastoral theatre out of her vision of rural innocence in a period of dynamic urban change" (Attille 156). Her photography projects in the rural

South underscored her identity as an artist and worked to prevent the erasure of marginalized cultures.

Nevertheless, one of the challenges Ulmann faced in approaching the Gullah community was a language barrier. The Gullah dialect was difficult to understand for those not attuned to it, like Peterkin. Therefore, Peterkin acted as a translator between Ulmann and her Gullah subjects. For example, in an article for *The Bookman* magazine appearing in 1930, Dale Warren recounts Ulmann telling him “of one black sister Nancy, who was cajoled into posing by Mrs. Peterkin’s sweet-talk” (136). On the other hand, this statement also reveals a distinct unequal exchange of gazes between both writer and photographer with the Gullahs, which will be explored further. In spite of Ulmann’s respect for her subjects, there are problematic instances, like photographing Nancy, where she appropriated the use of another’s gaze, like Peterkin’s, in order to photograph less willing subjects. Because Peterkin’s subjects couldn’t escape her gaze, Ulmann used Peterkin as a means to approach the Gullah and other rural African Americans in and around South Carolina, as evidenced by the story of Peterkin “sweet talking” one black sister into posing for Ulmann, indicating the subject’s reluctance to stand in front of Ulmann’s camera. In fact, in a letter to a friend in Manhattan, Ulmann confesses her frustration in not being able to photograph as many southern African Americans as she’d like: “The place is rich in material, but these negroes are so strange that it is almost impossible to photograph them. So this is rather a strenuous affair and then I do not feel satisfied” (quoted in Jacobs 64). This seems to contradict her established, empathetic method of approaching her subjects. Gillespie asserts that “Ulmann set up a certain distance between herself and her subjects” (139), yet after making an initial contact with

a subject, she would photograph them only with their permission. However, there was some cooperation with some of her African-American subjects. Even though Peterkin sweet talks Nancy into posing for Ulmann, Ulmann tries to make Nancy feel more comfortable by saying it's acceptable "for her to talk and move her head slightly." Nancy responded in a way that indicated she was not just a subject; she claimed an active role in the photographic process when she asserted, "No...I will not talk and I will not move. Something tells me to be quiet. This is God's work" (136). In spite of Nancy's initial unwillingness, it seems Ulmann succeeded in establishing an understanding, an exchange between herself and her Gullah subject. In the same article, Ulmann claims, "My best pictures are always taken when I succeed in establishing a bond of sympathy with my sitter" (142). The dignity and beauty of her images of African-Americans in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* suggest that in spite of her borrowing Peterkin's gaze from which her subjects could not escape, Ulmann was able to move beyond that and create that sympathetic bond with her subjects, regardless of any perceived distance she established.

In spite of her gaze exchanges with the Gullahs being complicated by class and race, Peterkin's need to write about them stemmed from a deep connection. Unlike Ulmann's relationships with her subjects, Nghana Tamu Lewis asserts the Gullahs were a part of Peterkin's life almost from birth. After the death of her mother shortly before her second birthday, she was raised by a Gullah woman. It is this woman, Maum Patsy, who taught her their language, so that "in 1903 when she married William Peterkin...she was no stranger to the values, rituals, and traditions of the black hands who lived and worked at Lang Syne Plantation. They were all Gullah descendants" (590, 591). In writing about them, Peterkin had to negotiate a difficult path between wanting to portray the Gullahs as

they were or how she saw and experienced them. Even though she was familiar with Gullah culture through her Gullah nanny, upon becoming the mistress of a plantation, she was thrust into the Gullah world populated by hundreds of Gullah workers and very few white people. As Lang Syne was a relatively self-sufficient, isolated place, the loneliness of a slow life based on seasonal cycles on the plantation, where she was now required, as long-time Gullah resident Maum Vinner explained, to “dominize” (Williams 8) its population, presented her with a challenge.

Perhaps the most life-changing challenge which deepened her connection with the Gullah culture occurred around the birth of her first and only child, and that experience provides an explanation for the ways in which she claimed agency through her Gullah characters. Peterkin arranged to have her father, an experienced physician, deliver her baby. The child was in a breech position and after hours of intense pain and pushing, her father administered an anesthetic, rendering her unconscious so that he could use forceps in order to help the child be born. While she was under anesthesia, her father decided to eliminate the risks of future potentially dangerous pregnancies by removing her ovaries. Her husband agreed, possibly because she gave birth to a son who would now be the heir to the plantation. The men in her life made the decision and her father carried out the procedure, without her consent. As Williams recounts, “For two years after the birth of her child, Julia refused to get out of bed” since her “postpartum depression was compounded by the psychological effects of premature menopause” combined with the anger and hatred she felt toward her father and her husband for sterilizing her (7). During her prolonged depression and recovery period, she was attended by a Gullah woman, Lavinia “Vinner” Berry, a former slave and a resident of the plantation when the

Peterkins purchased it. As part of Julia's convalescence, Vinner nursed Peterkin, telling her stories from her Gullah culture. One story recounted how long before the Peterkins bought the plantation, the land was ruled by an old Indian woman. Therefore, Vinner asserted that Peterkin was destined to become the next woman to rule the land because "[s]ome 'oman ever did dominize Lang Syne, an' eber will" (8). The word "dominize" is misleading, because in Gullah culture, it meant that Peterkin's role was one of importance as a matriarchal steward of the land and the people who lived upon it. Vinner had no faith in the Peterkin men and determined Julia had it in her to step into this role, but it meant that Peterkin needed to, as Vinner put it, "[d]on' shut up tings too tight een you' heart" (9), storing hate and anger, like she felt for her father and husband, as those feelings would destroy her. Certainly, the Gullah were no strangers to tragedy and loss and Vinner taught Peterkin how to move beyond it. Given this intimate connection, her history with the Gullah that developed before she ever put pen to paper, there's an opportunity to re-evaluate the paternalistic tones in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* within this context of her intimate relationship with the Gullah, and, more importantly, within the context of her text's juxtaposition with Ulmann's photographs.

With the encouragement of the Gullah culture around her, Peterkin realized she needed to change her perception of things. This required, as she describes in an essay accompanying her collected short stories, developing a new way of seeing: "I soon discovered that the ability to see is an acquirement... To learn how to do it requires time and patience, and not only a keen wish to know about things themselves but also to know how all things are bound together into one common whole" (*Collected Short Stories* 67). These are the things Vinner and the Gullah taught her. She acknowledged that "black



people had eyes that could not only see but also distinguish” (66) and their example enabled her to begin writing down their stories with a beautiful, awful verity.

To this end, as mentioned previously, even if Peterkin wasn’t including photographic language in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, she was using a gendered photographic aesthetic by creating photographic-like vignettes featuring detailed portraits of members of the Gullah community. In doing so, she was establishing what was worth seeing even though her subject matter, throughout her entire body of work, was deemed socially unacceptable by white, Southern society. Writing and seeking notoriety for one’s writing were, in themselves, activities outside the gender norms for women within genteel Southern society at the time, let alone writing about members of the southern, African-American community. Peterkin was willing to move beyond those gender norms because of been taught how to develop her own way of seeing by the Gullah. She asserts “[a]ll well-being depends on seeing things” (67), and this ability to see is not just limited to the beautiful, lighter aspects of life. Emily Clark, editor of *The Reviewer*, which was one of the few southern magazines to publish Peterkin’s work, quotes a letter from Peterkin where she expounds on one of the darker effects of her newly acquired seeing and how it informs her writing. Peterkin claims, “Things press in on me terribly, at times, and my writing is a real relief...I get rid of my own sorrows in repeating those of others” (*Innocence Abroad* 222). In that way, her Gullah subjects granted her agency to voice those sorrows. They gave her their language, shared their stories, taught her to see, and in exchange, she gives them a presence and a voice in the broader American culture that, up until that moment, no one had seen nor heard.

Much of southern literature prior to the time Peterkin began writing involved romanticizing the genteel class of white southern culture, featuring plantation tales of hoop-skirted belles, dapper southern gentlemen, and contented, happy Negroes, as in the novels of Thomas Nelson Page or the more racially charged work of Thomas Dixon (the white supremacist film, *Birth of a Nation*, was based on Dixon's novel, *The Clansman*). One reviewer of her work, Robert Adger Law, observed that while the initial story in her first collection, *Green Thursday*, "might attach to the romantic past of Thomas Nelson Page" (460, 461), he sees all that followed this story as "evidence she definitely turned away from her forebears and struck out for herself" (461). Instead, unlike her Southern literary forebears, Peterkin wrote from the point of view of African American field hands and farm workers, the ones whose labor made the genteel class's lifestyle possible, capturing the cadences of their own language on the page. Williams asserts that prior to Peterkin's first published collection of short stories, *Green Thursday*, "Many white Americans had never imagined that black farming people *had* a point of view" (72). Unlike other writers at the time, Peterkin presented her African-American characters, particularly African-American women, as strong, complex, non-stereotypical individuals who were not dependent on white society (although in reality they were dependent on the plantation for their livelihood). Her ear was attuned to the Gullah language and so her characters spoke in their own voices in her narratives. As a result, the work she produced drew praise from prominent African-American writers and founders of the Harlem Renaissance such as W.E.B. DuBois, James Weldon Johnson, and Countee Cullen. In the preface to her biography of Peterkin, Williams quotes DuBois's review of Peterkin's collection of stories, *Green Thursday*, which was published in his magazine, *The Crisis*,

in December of 1924. In the review, DuBois stated Peterkin had “the eye and the ear to see beauty and know truth” (Williams x) because Peterkin’s portrayal of her Gullah felt so authentic. In fact, it was not always clear to readers or reviewers of her work that Peterkin was white. Even contemporary scholars, for example historian Margaret Washington, who appears in Jamison’s documentary on Peterkin, read Peterkin’s work not realizing she was not black.

On the other hand, Peterkin faced not only disapproval but ostracism in Southern genteel society for writing about African Americans outside the accepted stereotypes. *The Review* (edited by Emily Clark), was one of the first southern periodicals to publish her stories. Williams recounts the response to Peterkin’s work appearing in *The Review* stating that “within a year she was receiving hate mail from white Southerners accusing her of betraying her race” (x). Peterkin explains in an article, “One Southern View-Point,” appearing in 1937 in *The North American Review*, “Failure to observe the accepted clichés in writing about any individual or group was punished, but especially was this true in regard to writing about Negroes” (392). Within the context of the Jim Crow South in the 1920s, such punishment could conceivably involve threats of violence. Her biographer quotes a letter she wrote to H.L. Mencken, who initially helped her to hone her literary voice. In it, Peterkin reflects on the possible ramifications of her writing about a taboo subject: “Many of the nearest whites are Ku Klux, I hear...I’d hate to wake up some fine morning and find white crosses on my door step” (quoted in Williams 39). This is because her “progressive fiction of impressive Gullah farmers was a direct threat to those whose history, society, and economy were dependent on the suppression of African Americans” (Kreidler 471). Peterkin’s characters, as she represents them on the

page, their independence from white culture (in fact, there are few white characters in her novels), their strengths, violate the southern behavioral norm that declared it was in “bad taste” to discuss “the way poor people were treated.” Further, “books sympathetic to the lower classes were resented by well-to-do Southerners as a threat to their status, to their comfortable way of life” (Williams 88), a way of life they maintained upon the backs of poor black laborers. This historical context within which Peterkin worked emphasizes the subversive nature of her narratives and contributed to the uniqueness of her collaboration with Ulmann, particularly when comparing *Roll, Jordan, Roll* to similar projects.

However, the devil in all of this lay in the conundrum Peterkin faced, which involved navigating through the conflict between her intimate connection with the Gullah culture, evident in how she treats them on the page, and that fact that she still clung to her place as a member of the plantation class. As a writer, she antagonized and alienated the genteel Southern plantation class by writing about the Gullah community as complex, independent human beings. Although, as her work gained national acceptance, it would eventually gain acceptance among Peterkin’s Southern peers, particularly after she was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. On the other hand, she was also inclined to continue to maintain her identity as a plantation mistress by never addressing outright the abuse of African Americans by southern whites. As a result, Peterkin was able to avoid “working out the sticky issue of racism by portraying complex, diverse characters of African heritage in an insular Gullah community without Anglo-American presence” (Kreidler 468). Further complicating the matter, in spite of her sympathetic portrayal of the Gullah community, her capacity for hearing and reproducing the rhythms of their language on the page, one could also argue that she was “the master using the slave’s language” (468). Therefore,

an important question must be considered. Was Peterkin, the woman with an intimate connection to the Gullah community, giving the Gullah characters a voice or was she appropriating their voice? The answer is as complex as Peterkin herself and her text in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* seems to reflect that complexity as did the responses of the readers. With regard to *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Williams asks, “How could a single book be both racist and socially uplifting?” and that “Julia and Doris [Ulmann] were responding to a whole spectrum of contradictory, confused, and uninformed attitudes toward poverty and race” (222). Reading Peterkin’s nonfiction text alone certainly contributes to a sense of racist paternalism that was absent in her fiction. However, reading her text in juxtaposition with Ulmann’s photographs offers a strikingly different interpretation of her work. As mentioned previously, the juxtaposition of Peterkin’s text with Ulmann’s photographs opens a space wherein a subtext emerges that appears to be addressing issues of race, even indirectly indicting racial inequities and violence.

By the time Peterkin collaborated on *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, she was nearing the end of her literary career. The strain of maintaining dual identities, one being her role as a white writer who was breaking social taboos by giving voice to the Other who were previously voiceless, and the other being her role as a plantation mistress, a part of the white plantation class who actively continued to suppress those voices, took its toll. She gradually stopped writing and retreated into her role as plantation mistress. Some scholars, including her biographer, believe that the text of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, seems to be pulling away from giving plantation workers their own voice, and instead approached romanticizing their lives in a way that none of her other books had done. The tone of the prose and some of the language choices in this work evoke the historical romanticism of

the South by writers like Thomas Page, who maintained the stereotype of the happy, child-like Negro farmhands. The very first line in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* references “the charm that made the life of the old South glamorous” (9), and on the next page Peterkin describes the “negro disposition which is naturally cheerful, for it encouraged them to forget sorrow and seize every chance for joy” (10). Williams suggests, “This may have made it easier for her to go home again, but it sank her literary reputation” (221). Whatever it may have done to her reputation, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* seemed to generate polarized reviews, winning the endorsement of the NAACP while a reviewer for the New York Times “slammed Julia for showing ‘a happy land of kindly masters and contented slaves’” (222), which is the formula for most old plantation novels where African-American characters are portrayed as being contented with their lot in life working for the white plantation class. While, on the surface, there are some paternalistic aspects of this formula in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Peterkin does acknowledge the hardships African Americans faced in the South. However, she stops short of directly advocating for civil rights for, or equal treatment of, or for any kind of improvement in the lives of African Americans. And yet, she facilitated the building a school for the children on Lang Syne, which included night classes for adults. Ulmann’s photographs and Peterkin’s text in juxtaposition with Ulmann’s images work against paternalistic rhetoric, racist stereotypes and, in the work as a whole, Peterkin’s Gullah voices still dominate. Indeed, they have the last word.

There were two published editions of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, a trade and a limited deluxe edition. Only 350 copies of the signed, large-format deluxe edition were published, and Williams describes it as a “polished diamond” (220). The trade edition

was not as polished though more copies were made available. Further, Ulmann's photos were not reproduced at their highest quality in the trade edition, making many faces look like "black blobs" according to Peterkin (quoted in Williams 221). The way the photographs were reproduced in the trade edition softens crucial details that might suggest Ulmann "intended to obscure or romanticize the poverty of her subjects" (221). There was no softening to that extent in the images in the deluxe edition. Regardless, there is enough detail in the trade edition images to suggest Ulmann was not erasing detail to soften the real conditions or circumstances of her subjects.

Peterkin's text, however, remained relatively unchanged in both editions and the opening lines of the book can certainly be interpreted in a romanticized, paternalistic way: "Some of the charm that made the life of the old South glamorous still lingers on a few plantations that have been so cut off from the outside world...undisturbed by the restless present" (9). However, before anyone reads these words, Ulmann's first image of an elderly African American male appears opposite the title page, which signals the introduction of a subtext that threads throughout the entire work because of the juxtaposition of text and images. For example, there is no caption that identifies this individual. None of the photographs in either the trade or limited editions identifies the people in the images, which problematizes Ulmann's efforts to preserve individual "types" from erasure, or to preserve the dignity of her subjects, while omitting their names or other identifying information. Gillespie asserts that a possible reason for this involves the fact that "she did not create the individual photographs in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* to be illustrative," and that she "typically did not note the identity of many of her subjects" (97). Gillespie goes on to note, however, that Ulmann, overall, seemed to omit

the identities primarily of her “subjects of color [which is] problematic...as it suggests that she treated them differently, denying them their individuality” (97). On the other hand, their identities, in some cases, can be inferred by their juxtaposition with the corresponding text, creating a symbiotic relationship between image and text that is free from Ulmann’s input through attaching captions. In the end, without Peterkin’s text, the images would have no context, and without Ulmann’s photographs, Peterkin’s text reads very differently. The two genres combined as they are, provide a space from which this important subtext emerges.

Regardless of possible reasons for lack of identification of individuals in her photographs, the story of the elderly African American man who appears opposite the title page lies in his face, his expression, the way he sits leaning on a cane. And while it’s difficult to tell in the trade edition of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, it’s still apparent this man’s pants are worn or possibly stained, even though his shirt appears white and clean. He doesn’t look directly into the camera. He is unsmiling and his right hand grips his cane as if he needs it to steady himself. This initial image provides a stark contrast to Peterkin’s description of African Americans whose “chief blessing” was a “disposition which is naturally cheerful, for it encouraged them to forget sorrow and seize every chance for joy” (10). There is no presence of southern glamor or cheer in this man’s expression. Rather, his face, his hands (like the hands resting on a tool handle in Modotti’s photograph in fig. 33), his posture, his clothing seem to indicate a sense of fatigue, sober evidence of a harder life than Peterkin’s opening text describes. While his face may not express sorrow, it doesn’t contain joy. Nevertheless, Ulmann has captured the dignity in this man’s demeanor, and this portrait offers an important key with which to consider the



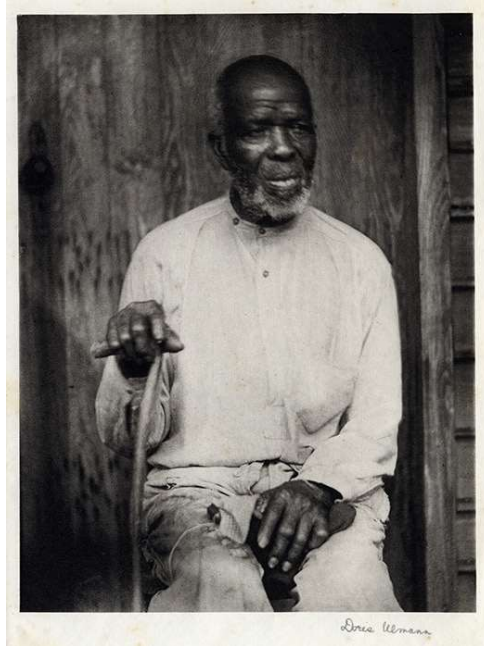


Fig. 44 Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Doris Ulmann, ca. 1929

text to follow. It is one of many images that are a testament to the rural, African-American tenacity of grace and dignity in the face of difficult, sometimes harrowing circumstances. Ironically, this is how Peterkin portrayed the characters throughout her fiction, even if, on the surface, her tone and text appear to fall short of the same kind of energy and empathy in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Ulmann's images are an unequivocal reminder of the overall beauty and awful veracity in Peterkin's Gullah stories. However, this photograph also suggests an alternative way of reading and interpreting Peterkin's text in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, not only because of the photographic aesthetic of Ulmann's photographs and their juxtaposition with Peterkin's text; this image has a historical significance that is not readily apparent but provides a way for Peterkin to indirectly indict the members of her own plantation class.

The importance of this first image and its indication of an alternative way of interpreting Peterkin's text lies not just in its juxtaposition, but also in the story behind

the image. The man whose portrait provides the introductory image to *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, was not a resident of Lang Syne, but a man Ulmann and Peterkin met during their travels through the rural Deep South in 1929, a man known as Cudjo Lewis. When Peterkin, in her opening text, describes the “[b]lack men lately brought from Africa” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 9), she may have been indirectly referring to Lewis as he was purported to be a survivor of the last slave ship, the *Clotilda*. In 1860, the *Clotilda* delivered a cargo of slaves north of Mobile, Alabama right before the Civil War, decades after the international slave trade was made illegal. Ten years after writing Peterkin’s biography, Susan Williams discovered the connection between Peterkin and Lewis when she found Lewis’s image in a book published in 2009 by Sylviane Diouf about the last slave ship and she connected it to the image taken by Ulmann of the same man. Diouf states that the lives of those slaves who arrived on the *Clotilda* “had been widely reported in the newspapers, and over the course of sixty-five years, the Africans of Mobile talked to journalists and writers, from obscure people to a Pulitzer Prize winner, and the future novelist Zora Neale Hurston” (3). Williams also states that at the time Peterkin and Ulmann met and photographed Lewis, Lewis was considered “a kind of cult figure among anthropologists and historians” (“Something to Feel About” 294). Hurston, an anthropology student at Columbia University in 1927, had interviewed him and published an article about him, which Peterkin may have read.<sup>12</sup>

A few years after Ulmann and Peterkin met Lewis, Peterkin included a sketch of his life told through the character of Big Pa in her novel *Bright Skin*, which appeared in 1932, a year before *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Williams surmises that Peterkin included the retelling of part of Lewis’s life through Big Pa because although it may have made sense

“to tell Cudjo Lewis’s story as non-fiction in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*” she “used Lewis as a way to imagine what it was like for a person to be captured and sold into slavery” and to “offer a way to feel the horror and dispossession of the slave trade” (“Something to Feel About” (297). And yet, by placing the portrait of this man who survived capture, the Middle Passage, being sold into five years of slavery long after the international slave trade had already been abolished, and who was now living in the Jim Crow South as the frontispiece to *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, this established the visual ground upon which Peterkin could harness a photographic aesthetic that she could use to indirectly indict her own plantation class. Some of the members of her plantation class were descendants of those who had been engaged in illegal human trafficking of individuals like Lewis, and who still longed for the “charm” of the glamorous “old South” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 9) that slave labor helped provide.

Most would find it difficult to find glamor in a history involving slavery and Peterkin seems to grapple with that in the pages of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Even though she doesn’t directly identify Cudjo Lewis, she may have relied on his notoriety, particularly in the South, particularly after his story was recounted in several places, including Emma Langdon Roche’s book published in 1914, *Historic Sketches of the South*, in which a photograph of Lewis appears. Lewis’s image as the introduction to *Roll, Jordan, Roll* underlines Peterkin’s emphasis on creating nonfiction anecdotes and sketches of rural, African Americans, many of them living on her plantation. And many of the stories contained therein had been used in altered form in other stories and in her novels. Peterkin’s biographer includes a quote from one of Peterkin’s letters to Irving Fineman, a New York novelist who became Peterkin’s lover, that can also describe her own

motivation for writing about the people living on her plantation. As indicated previously, Peterkin describes Mary Weeks, the Gullah woman on Lang Syne who would inspire the character of Mary in *Scarlet Sister Mary* as “a devil and a good woman too” and she explains, “I want to write about her because she’s had the courage to live fully, freely, wickedly, and still keep at peace with herself” (*A Devil and a Good Woman, Too* 110). These are sentiments Peterkin wished she could have embraced more fully, herself. Though she did step outside the southern gender norms ascribed to women in her class, she was not at peace with the dual nature of her life’s path. While she was a successful writer recreating the lives of the complex African-American characters living on her plantation in her fiction, fraternizing with writers and artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance, she was also the mistress of a southern plantation, a restricted roll with rigid gender norms, particularly for members of the genteel plantation class. Nevertheless, Peterkin gained agency through writing about the Gullah. She borrowed stories from Mary’s life and the lives of other individuals and was able, therefore, to live more fully through them, not unlike Katherine Anne Porter gained agency through her character, María Concepción. That said, Mary Weeks does not seem to appear directly, either photographically or textually, as a character in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, but after writing a collection of stories *Green Thursday* (1924) and three novels, *Black April* (1927), *Scarlet Sister Mary* (1928), and *Bright Skin* (1932), all of which feature Gullah characters, the indomitable Gullah spirit still permeates the text of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

Including the photo of the elderly Cudjo Lewis opposite the title page, there are a total of seventy-one photographs distributed throughout *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Though not all of them were taken on Lang Syne, they illuminate and lend a photographic aesthetic to

Peterkin's seemingly haphazard collection of essays and sketches of life on her plantation. There is no linear narrative in this work as in her novels. Gillespie asserts that "Peterkin wasn't sure which essays to include with which photographs" (93) and Ulmann wasn't available for consultation at that time. Therefore, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* has a patchwork quality on the surface. One can read chapters in any sequence. The one unifying factor beyond the consistency of subject matter is the subtext that emerges through the juxtaposition of images and text, a subtext that can be tracked throughout the book from the beginning.

Peterkin begins *Roll, Jordan, Roll* with an overall assessment of the history of slavery in the South that appears paternalistic in tone. For example, she alludes to the Gullah's natural cheerfulness and inclination to "forget sorrow and seize every chance for joy" (10). To underscore this, Peterkin claims that although slavery has been abolished, the descendants of slaves still "expect the white [land] owner to help them settle their difficulties...and protect them from injustice" (11). However, she also admits that "slavery must have brought many bitter hardships to black people who were born in a land where white customs and ideas were unknown," particularly for slaves working in the plantation manor, like the image of the Gullah woman ironing clothes (fig 45) for her white employers. While it may be hard to interpret the ironing woman's expression in this image, she looks directly, unflinchingly into the camera while attending to her task. Again, there is no cheerfulness in her expression, but hers is a gaze that engages not just the photographer, but every person who views her image. This woman commands this exchange, and it is the viewer who cannot escape her gaze. The intensity of her gaze seems to undermine any attempt to render her as a stereotype. Indeed, in the text

following the images of working Gullah women, Peterkin states, “It’s absurd to place all Negroes in one great social class, mark it ‘colored,’ and make generalizations about its



Fig. 45 *Sis*, Doris Ulman, 1929-1931  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

poverty, ignorance, immorality. Negro individuals differ in character and mentality as widely as do people with lighter skins” (16). This statement, along with Ulmann’s image of the ironing woman, work to contradict Peterkin’s earlier assertion, which generalizes about the cheerful temperament of rural, southern blacks, offering evidence that she may be working to pull away from her role as a plantation mistress.

For example, there’s one anecdote in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* that illustrates this, and it is juxtaposed with some of the few images that depict smiling, young African Americans, calling into questions Peterkin’s intent in juxtaposing an anecdote involving murder with smiling faces, although it also evokes the kind of primitive justice that Katherine Anne Porter depicts in “María Concepción.” In “María Concepción,” María kills her husband’s lover and claims her child, an act that is not condemned by the indigenous Mexican

community who shield her from non-indigenous law enforcement. In chapter five, Peterkin's account of a young black boy in the service of his white, young bachelor, "Cap'n," presents a similar scenario of primitive justice, although she also connects this justice to the plantation class's embrace of an outdated chivalric code.

In this chapter, Peterkin describes a young black man, referred to only as "boy," as one who loves to imitate his white employer, gaining agency through him, even to the extent of getting away with murder. While, the "boy" is never named, and the term "boy" is often presented in quotation marks, perhaps as a way to draw attention to the way the term "boy" was used in a pejorative way by some southern whites to address African-American men, regardless of their age. On the other hand, the young white bachelor is only identified by the name the young black man gives him, which grants the nameless "boy" the agency of naming. Regardless, when the "boy" kills his wife's lover, the Cap'n "gave him a stiff drink and warmer underclothes" (64) and sent him to the sheriff to turn himself in. The "boy" is so confident his association with his Cap'n, in his imitation of white, southern chivalry, that he believes he won't be held accountable. He even falls asleep during the trial, at the end of which, he is found innocent. This is not dissimilar to María Concepción's "primitive justice" where, like "boy," she is the one who was betrayed and so exonerated from killing her spouse's lover in retribution, just as "boy" is found innocent after executing a similar form of justice. What makes this story disturbing is that Ulmann's image of the person associated with this story is one of the few photos she took of an African American smiling in front of the camera. This raises a startling incongruity in the way justice is perceived or executed in the Deep South, knowing that African Americans were lynched and killed for far less serious infractions committed

against white individuals. However, when an African-American man admits to killing his spouse's lover, a fellow African American, it's viewed almost as folksy comedy, because as the smiling "boy" asserts to the judge presiding over his trial, "De Cap'n would a done same as I done...I reckon you woulda, too, Judge," (67) after which, the judge's frown faded and the jury read the not guilty verdict. In spite of the folksy tone of this anecdote, the juxtaposition of the smiling images has a startling effect that raises questions about Peterkin's inclusion of this story to coincide with these particular images, unless her intent was to indirectly indict the inequalities of the justice system with regard to African Americans. "Boy" is acquitted only because he is imitating the behavior of a member of the white plantation class.

Williams, herself, comments on this chapter containing the story of "boy," saying it is "the most offensive section" (222) in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. However, when Peterkin opens this anecdote with the statement, "Negro servants often imitate the white people they serve" (59), she appears to be offering an indictment of the medieval, chivalric code adopted by southern white gentlemen. It was a code that "presumed aristocratic virtues as gallantry...polished manners, [and] a high sense of personal and family honor" (191). It was also a "chivalric ideal [that] provided invaluable support to the paternalism that mediated master-slave relations" (Genevise 192) like the relationship between Cap'n and "boy." As such, it is the code that allows the white, Southern court of law to excuse "boy's" behavior because they, too, would expect to be exonerated after committing similar acts in the name of family honor. After all, the "boy" was only imitating the white master he serves. When the "boy" reminds the judge of this, he is found not guilty. In fig. 46, the smiling young black man is holding a pair of boots in his lap, presumably



the castoff boots of the young, white bachelor who employs him as Peterkin states he “not only preferred Cap’n’s cast-off garments to new ones he could buy from a store, but he constantly boasted that he and Cap’n were exactly alike in their tastes, especially where women and horses were concerned” (59). In fig. 47, the image of the young



Fig. 46 Doris Ulmann, 1929-1931  
Photogravure for *Roll, Jordan, Roll*



Fig. 47 Doris Ulmann, 1929-1931  
Photogravure for *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

man smiling fondly as he gazes upon the seated young woman, a young woman to whom he seems about to serve a beverage, is incongruous within the context of story about a man who committed murder. However, beneath the folksy lightheartedness it appears there is a veiled criticism of the young, white bachelor and the class to which he belongs, condoning murder based on the violation of an antiquated notion of honor, as long as the violence is not committed by a black “boy” against a white person. Williams asserts that in Peterkin’s fiction, “her greatest strength as a writer had come from her ability to create characters in conflict with one another, to spin anecdotes about human behavior into highly charged psychological dramas,” but the anecdotes in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, like this one portraying primitive justice, seems to assert, to some critics, the old, stereotypical racist trope that “rural blacks were primitive” (223). Instead, this juxtaposition of text and

Ulmann's photographic aesthetic allows for an alternative interpretation of an anecdote perhaps meant to indict rather than to defend racist stereotypes.

There is another, more perplexing and disturbing juxtaposition that needs to be considered within the context of Ulmann's photographs. In addressing the Gullahs and their relationship with religion in the first chapter, Peterkin claims that the "negro ways and ideas" have had an indelible influence on white culture from the "bombastic eloquence" of politicians to Southern Evangelicals who imitate "the ear-filling phrases more concerned with sound than sense, that delight negro congregations when such oratorical effects fall from the lips of black preachers" (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 19). However, Peterkin extends the black influence in a way that produces a strikingly incongruous comparison when she says, "The long white robes of the Ku Klux Klan bear a curious resemblance to the robes worn by Negro candidates for baptism." As if that connection isn't disturbing enough, she then goes on to say, "Both groups rely on the cross of the crucified Jesus to help them overcome their enemies, whether the enemies are Satan and sin or only the foreign-born and people of other races." Peterkin understood the violent, racist tenets of the Klan when she expressed concern over whether she'd find crosses on her own doorstep. Therefore, why does Peterkin suggest a connection between peaceful black penitents in white robes seeking baptism and a group who actively persecuted, tortured, and executed black individuals? Was Peterkin making a backhanded criticism of the racial violence of the KKK, an organization that experienced a resurgence, or a "second coming" in the 1920s? Or was she trying to mollify those who might be tempted to leave crosses at her doorstep? Perhaps, given the complex character of Peterkin herself and the tension between her empathy for the Gullahs and her role as plantation mistress,

her motive for the connection may involve a bit of both, particularly when examining Ulmann's photography of a Gullah baptism (fig. 48), Peterkin's own knowledge of Klan



Fig. 48 Doris Ulmann, ca 1929-1931  
Photogravure for *Roll, Jordan, Roll*



Fig. 49 *Ku Klux Klan Initiation Ceremony*, ca 1923, *History Hub*  
ABC-CLIO, 2019, Accessed 5 Mar. 2019  
[historyhub.abcclio.com/Search/Display/2146227](https://historyhub.abcclio.com/Search/Display/2146227)

activity, and a photo of a Klan initiation ceremony from around 1923 (fig. 49).

Peterkin's connection between baptismal and Klan robes and Ulmann's images of a Gullah baptism are separated by several chapters, so there is no immediate juxtaposition between the text referencing baptismal and Klan robes and Ulmann's photographs, but Ulmann's images evoke her initial jarring comparison. Further, this is the only mention of the Klan on a page that appears between an image of Gullah field workers and an image featuring a woman with metal tubs balanced on her head. Nevertheless, when the reader finally views Ulmann's images of a baptism in the fourth chapter, the beauty and intimacy of this sacred moment in a penitent's life is unmistakable and still appears to function as a criticism of Klan violence by having previously drawn such a disturbing connection between the garb symbolic of a celebration of spiritual rebirth and robes that

obscure the identities of members of a violent organization targeting African Americans like the penitents being baptized.

River baptisms were common in the rural South, and it's the Biblical river Jordan that lends its name to the title of the book, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. However, it's rare that Ulmann was allowed to witness this ritual, which she documents in chapter four, even if, as Sarah Gillespie suggests, it may have been staged: "Either way, she was given extraordinary access to an event or a reenactment of one that might typically have been limited to known members of the community" (113). This speaks to Ulmann's gendered, photographic aesthetic demonstrated by her ability to connect with her subjects, even though she needed Peterkin to introduce her to and act as interpreter of Gullah culture. And, even though Peterkin's mention of the Klan and Ulmann's photographs of robed penitents are separated by a couple of chapters, her baptism images are powerful enough to still offer Peterkin an opportunity to use that photographic aesthetic to indict racial violence by making her shocking comparison.

The individuals in both photos, Ulmann's and the snapshot of Klansmen, are involved in a ritual while wearing white robes, but that's where the comparison ends. Even though the Klan fashioned their own version of "baptism" during initiation ceremonies, it's a perversion, at best, of a sacred ritual meant to facilitate spiritual metamorphosis. The qualities of grace and dignity of Ulmann's subjects emphasize a sense of reverence as they stand thigh-high in river water with locked arms. The light renders them almost ethereal in water so still their white robes are reflected on the surface, accentuating the sacredness of this moment. Further, they are not centered in the frame, but in the lower left, subject to the looming presence of nature as the dominant

element in the composition, suggesting their belief in being a part of a greater whole, like Peterkin references in her essay, “Seeing Things.” The Gullah taught Peterkin how to become “aware of the great tide of life that flows around me” (*Collected Stories* 67). Baptismal penitents wade into that tide and emerge reborn through a ritual that is the antithesis of a Klan ceremony. Peterkin later explains that baptismal robes are worn only once and then are “put away after the ceremony to serve as their shrouds some day” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 88), which adds a dark irony to her indictment of the Klan, who may have been responsible for deaths that would necessitate the final wearing of that shroud. Finally, Gullah baptismal robes were worn by penitents seeking a new identity as part of the greater church community, while Klan robes were uniforms designed to obscure identities.

In making such a connection between Gullah baptismal garb and Klan uniforms, Peterkin was certainly aware of some Klan initiation customs, including donning the white robes. According to historian Linda Gordon, initiation into the Klan did involve a form of baptism, where “a new member would be baptized, pledged to cleanliness in mind, spirit, and body; it also somewhat heretically, made new members part of the body of the Klan. The robe was emblematic of purity” (72). Looking at the figures in the photograph of Klansmen in fig. 49, one can see why Peterkin can draw a line from the white robes of African-American baptismal robes and Klan robes. However, other historians (Parsons) link the evolution of Klan robes to minstrelsy and fraternal orders, before the robes became the standardized white with the white hood in the 1920s. Parson argues that Klan garb was related to performance, and that the “popular Klan costume of flowing robes with the symbols sewn onto them evoked the antebellum sense of the

medieval” although these costumes “were bitter mockeries of honor culture” (830). This is the same medieval honor code Peterkin pushes back against in her story about “boy” and the white, southern bachelor. However, “Klan violence would be neither honorable nor gentlemanly” (831). Even if the Klan wasn’t responsible for all the racial violence in the South, though they were highly active in South Carolina at this time. There were instances of Klan violence that occurred not far from Lang Syne. One particular instance captured her attention as a prospective subject for a future book she hoped to write.

Even while, as Williams asserts, “Julia liked to tell her literary friends that the people of Lang Syne and the surrounding countryside were insulated against racial violence” (139), she voiced concerns about such violence as in the previously quoted letter she wrote to H.J. Mencken where she admitted that “Many of the nearest whites are Ku Klux” (quoted in Williams 39) and that she feared finding burning crosses at her doorstep. In fact, there was a highly publicized lynching in 1925 that occurred in a town fifty miles west of Lang Syne that drew national attention, as did the murder of a black man closer to Peterkin’s home in the South Carolina. When a prosperous black businessman, V.H. “Pink” Whaley of St. Matther’s parish, the parish wherein Peterkin lived, was murdered in 1925, Williams asserts that Peterkin shied away from the case “suspecting that people she knew had helped to engineer the murder” (142), an appropriate response given that the publishing of her earlier stories produced hate mail from her fellow southerners. The NAACP sent a representative, Walter White, to investigate the murder. White was familiar with Peterkin’s fiction as he had praised her first collection of Gullah stories, *Green Thursday*, which was published in September of 1924. However, after White interviewed people surrounding the case, Julia asked him for

information about Whaley, intending to write a book about him, which would be as close to an outright statement against racial violence that she could make. However, for whatever reasons, that book was never written. Nevertheless, having been in such close proximity to incidents of racial violence with many of her nearest white neighbors possibly being “Ku Klux,” it seems unlikely that Peterkin was making a casual or unconscious connection between Gullah baptismal robes and Klan costumes in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Rather, her text’s proximity to Ulmann’s photographs provided a way to level criticism that indirectly indicts racial violence.

Another curious juxtaposition of text and images that allows for a similar re-interpretation of Peterkin’s text occurs in chapter nine. In this chapter, Peterkin talks about the origin of Negro spirituals and how they are “tightly bound up with the history of the Negroes who were brought as slaves to America” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 166-199). There is a distinct noticeable lyrical quality to the text in this section, as if the exuberance of the spirituals and their “heart-searching harmonies” (116) that “give permanent expression to whatever agitates their souls or sets their emotions in turmoil” bolstered her own writing. Peterkin establishes how these songs were reserved solely for church services, but they permeated every aspect of Gullah life, sung by people working in the fields, cutting firewood in the swamp, washing clothes, or hoeing gardens. She also mentions that even members of chain gangs “sing to the clink of leg shackles,” which portends the three photographs of chain gangs that appear in the heart of this chapter. Of the six images in this chapter, half of them are of chain gangs, even though the subject of chain gangs is only mentioned twice—in the first chapter where Peterkin explains how poor African Americans can end up on the chain gang for “failure to pay poll tax or

property tax” (120). The poll tax itself was a confusing and enormously successful iniquitous scheme developed during Jim Crow to disenfranchise African American voters (Woodward 83-85). Still, at the beginning of this chapter, she describes prisoners singing to the clink of their leg shackles. This curious juxtaposition of Ulmann’s images of black men in chains with Peterkin’s text that recounts the slaves’ embrace of the Christianity with child-like faith, even while Christian scripture was used to justify slavery, and her mention of the poll tax allows, once again, an opportunity for a critical subtext to emerge. In this chapter on Negro spirituals, only one photo out of six shows individuals in a church setting. The chapter’s first image depicts between fifteen to twenty well-dressed African Americans, some of whom are sitting, some of whom are standing, some with clasped hands and some with hands raised, and a man in a suit sits facing the camera while holding a large book, presumably the Bible. Turning the page on which this image appears, the photograph on the opposite side features a man in a boat at an angle that appears to be pointing toward the next page of text where Peterkin outlines the evolution of religion from the old African tradition of using charms and conjures through their arrival in this country as slaves, where they were introduced to Christianity, and where “churches were a mainstay of the whole slave system” because the “Scriptures justified slavery” and determined that the dark races were destined to be “the servants of servants” (120) where freedom would come only in heaven if they obeyed their masters faithfully. Therefore, it was natural that a race that Peterkin says is naturally inclined to singing would “sing about the joys of that life to come” (122). Spirituals, however, differ from hymns because they spring spontaneously from the spirit and the need for an “outpouring of hopes and needs” that are “unhindered by dogma or convention,” addressing the



miseries of life in comparison with an eternal life free of poverty and “the slave-driver’s lash” (125). In the heart of Peterkin’s explanation of the evolution of spirituals, lie three images of men in chain gangs, wearing their striped prison uniforms, depicted hacking at the earth with picks or shovels.



Fig. 50 Doris Ulmann, ca 1929-1931  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

When Peterkin goes on to describe the Gullahs’ fear of hell, the destination fated for sinners, this text appears opposite fig. 50 featuring a long line of prisoners, heads down or bent over under the gaze of the white guard holding a long gun, evoking the presence of an overseer holding the “slave-driver’s lash.” On the other side of this page is another photograph of a single man standing in a boat and, again, the boat sits at an angle that seems to point back to the previous images of the chain gangs. The boats arranged in this way seem to bracket and point toward the juxtaposition of Peterkin’s text with the images of the chain gangs. This is a curious arrangement that, like previous juxtapositions of text and images, indicates a critical subtext. Perhaps a key to the

relationship between photographs of prisoners at hard labor and a lyrical text describing the evolution of spirituals and the Gullahs' relationship with religion lies in her explanation of the spiritual "Roll, Jordan, Roll," which also provides the title for the book.

At the end of chapter nine, Peterkin describes how spirituals are elastic and can be adapted to any situation, functioning as a dirge at funerals as well as a celebration of life depending on the context in which they are sung. As an example, she names the song, "Roll, Jordan, Roll." In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois refers to this spiritual as a "sorrow song." Whatever joy spirituals express, they are more often "the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways" (95). Spirituals also offered a vehicle for slaves to communicate in a veiled language what they couldn't express directly, like the desire for freedom. There are several versions of the lyrics to this sorrow song, but the common thread among them is the image of crossing or having crossed the Jordan river, a body of water the Israelites had to cross to enter the promised land after escaping from their Egyptian slave masters. The river is both a metaphor and a reality as many routes to freedom in the North involved crossing a river. "Roll, Jordan, Roll," then expresses the longing of slaves hoping to escape to a place of freedom. This is the feeling the images of the chain gangs evoke and they are at the heart of this chapter, and nearly the heart of the book. The images of men in chains are symbolic of a people who have yet to shed the shackles of the Jim Crow South, even if they are no longer slaves. Therefore, the elasticity of the spiritual, the meaning of which changes depending on the context coupled with the weight of words that carry multiple,

sometimes veiled meanings, works as a metaphor for Peterkin's text, the meaning of which changes within the context of Ulmann's photographs. For an author who cannot directly indict her own white plantation class, Peterkin evokes the name of this spiritual, possibly as the initial indication that there is a subtext in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, a further indication that there is a way to interpret her text differently within the context of or juxtaposition to Ulmann's images.

Another reference to chain gangs appears in chapter four, the one preceding the story of the "boy" and the "Cap'n," where Peterkin presents an example of another form of primitive justice. This chapter is significant because it also includes a seemingly casual reference to chain gangs, a comment made weightier after viewing Ulmann's images of chain gangs. Unlike the anecdote involving "boy and the "Cap'n," Jinny's story in chapter four is not about imitating whites, but about a conflict between a Gullah woman (Jinny) and her man. In this chapter as well, the text is juxtaposed with smiling portraits of a Gullah woman and a Gullah man meant to represent the main characters in the anecdote (the portrait of the woman was not of a resident of Lang Syne and the image was taken on the Melrose plantation in Louisiana). Peterkin begins this chapter by describing the behavior of Gullah women when they fall in love, committing acts of violence as a response to unfaithfulness, as when a Gullah man cheats on a Gullah woman with another woman. Unlike in chapter five, this particular conflict involving Jinny is not resolved using murder, and yet it contains the same folksy tone and attitude to describe a crime that has been committed, a crime which is again dismissed in a court of law by a white judge in favor of primitive justice.

In this chapter, Peterkin recounts the story of a female field hand, Jinny, who cuts one of her “gentlemen friends,” a man who, like “boy,” is only referred to as “the cut man,” when he and the woman he is having an affair with cross the threshold of the church all three are attending. Jinny rushes forward and cuts him. As a result, she is taken to court to be tried, but the cut man refuses to testify against Jinny, and Jinny, who considers his lack of courage a greater weakness, stands up and confesses to cutting him, but explains why. He was “walkin out wid dat black, slew-foot hussy” and assures that if he did it again, she’d “cut his coward heart out of em. I was easy on em dis time, but e better not cause me to lay hands on em again” (54). After Jinny’s statement, the white judge attempts to “get his face straight” (implying he is suppressing a smile), a response that reflects the same kind of paternalism connected to the plantation class’s attachment to an old, outdated chivalric code that allows violence as a response to infidelity, a violation of honor, which is a violation of that code.

Just as in the chapter featuring Cap’n and “boy,” the portraits of the smiling Gullah woman and the smiling Gullah man in this chapter, coupled with a description of trial witnesses who “all howled so with laughter” (57) when Jinny described being “so disappoint in a man,” exaggerate a sense of misplaced merriment in the face of violence. However, as in the case of “boy,” that violence is not committed against a white person and is, therefore, not a threat. Even though the judge planned to sentence Jinny to the chain gang, to which Jinny responded with “her mouth...wide open with surprisement” (58), he suspends that sentence due to Jinny’s “good behavior.” Afterward, Jinny and the cut man walk out of the court room arm in arm and Jinny “has him yet.” However, Peterkin’s casual mention of a woman being sentenced to a chain gang is jarring at the

end of this folksy, even lighthearted anecdote, particularly since the common image of a chain gang involves men (more often men of color) in chains, like Ulmann's images included later in chapter nine. Ulmann shot a series of photographs featuring chain gangs in the south, which was unique subject matter at that time, but especially unusual for an upper-class white woman from New York. However, Peterkin's casual mention of this particular form of carceral punishment, a sentence generally not associated with women, is jarring, particularly when juxtaposed with Ulmann's images of a smiling Gullah woman and a smiling Gullah man.

In the same way that Peterkin makes a seemingly casual mention of the Klan in a previous chapter when she suggests a disturbing connection between the white robes of baptismal penitents and the white robes of Klansmen, her equally casual mention of a female possibly being sentenced to a chain gang is just as disturbing, particularly when juxtaposed with Ulmann's images. This mention also anticipates the actual images of chain gangs later in the book. And just as the penitent/Klan robe connection could be read as her indirect indictment of the Klan, her mention of a chain gang, or worse—a female being sentenced to a male chain gang indicates that Peterkin was not only aware of this phenomenon, she used this reference in relationship with smiling Gullah portraits to, again, indirectly indict another abusive practice in the Jim Crow South with regard to African-American women.

Indeed, women were sentenced to chain gangs at the time Peterkin prepared her text for *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. Just as Peterkin claimed early on that African Americans could be sentenced to the chain gang for not paying poll or property taxes, historian Sarah Haley states, "Regardless of their age, black women were sent to the chain gang for

minor offenses, especially larceny and possessing or selling whisky” (65). Conditions individuals had to endure as part of a chain gang were abysmal for both men and women. but for women, “[t]he chain gang replicated the particular dialectics of black women’s oppression under slavery” (55) in the way that, “black female bodies were put to work on chain gangs, where all of the other laboring bodies were male” thereby erasing their identity as women. White women were also sentenced to time on chain gangs, but they were not sent to the chain gang at the same rate as black women, even when white women were convicted for committing similar or greater offenses. Even if Peterkin didn’t know this statistic, it’s difficult to believe she wouldn’t have been aware of the consequences a Gullah woman would face after being sentenced to a chain gang. Jinny’s response of wide-mouthed “surprisement” at the judge’s sentence, particularly after her “victim” refused to implicate her, demonstrates the impact of the sentence. In spite of Jinny’s confession, such a sentence would involve punishment far greater than the crime she committed. Though Haley wrote mainly about chain gangs in Georgia, chain gangs were an outgrowth of convict lease camps in the South, providing free labor for private companies. At the turn of the nineteenth in to the twentieth century, the camps were closed and replaced with chain gangs, who provided labor for public projects like road building, though the horrendous conditions in the camps persisted: “Women and men alike faced food scarcity, disease, work injuries, excruciating labor demands, violence, and death” (Haley, *No Mercy Here* 65). In addition, Jinny’s punishment may have even lasted longer than the original sentence as many women released from the chain gang were assigned parole, which involved a year or more of domestic servitude for white families (174). Thus, in spite of the levity in the courtroom around Jinny’s confession,

suggesting she'd do time on a chain gang was a heavy-handed disproportionate response to her crime, particularly when her own victim refused to testify against her. This contrast serves as another sub-textual indictment of a horrific carceral practice imposed on African Americans women mainly in the South, a fate any of Peterkin's Gullah workers could face if charged by a white court.

In fact, it is curious that the chapter that follows Jinny's story, involving Cap'n and his "boy," the "boy" commits a far worse crime than Jinny, murder, and yet he is found not guilty by reason that he was only imitating his white master. In juxtaposing these two stories, Peterkin seems to be indicating a gender and racial inequity when it comes to the law and punishment of African Americans in the Jim Crow South. After Jinny performs her own act of primitive justice, her victim lives, refuses to testify against her, and still the judge sentenced her to the chain gang. Even though the judge suspends her sentence, the mere suggestion that Jinny could have been sent to a chain gang while the "boy" was found not guilty after confessing to murdering his wife, is a stark example of gender inequity with grave, long lasting consequences for women of color caught in the carceral system.

In contrast, chapters six, seven, and eight address the black church and its importance in the Gullah community. The images in these chapters include moving photographic and textual portraits of parishioners performing church rituals like foot washing (a reenactment of Christ washing the feet of his disciples) or kneeling at the mourner's bench where penitents seek the experience of "coming through," which involves the divine reception of forgiveness for one's sins. Peterkin takes the reader inside the black church, both the Baptist and the Methodist churches located at opposite

ends of the plantation, explaining the beginnings of the black church. She also states in the opening of chapter six how whites were reluctant to “surrender[] control over their religion” after the slaves were freed, but free blacks wanted “independent churches in order to have equality in their church life” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 68). This is one of the few instances where Peterkin mentions how freed Gullah slaves sought equality with regard to anything. And even though the Gullahs didn’t have monetary resources to build churches like the ones in the white community, it was important to them to have their own place and space in which to worship free from the gaze of former “masters,” who once used Christianity to justify and enforce the practice of slavery.



Fig. 51 Doris Ulmann, ca 1929-1931  
Photogravure for *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

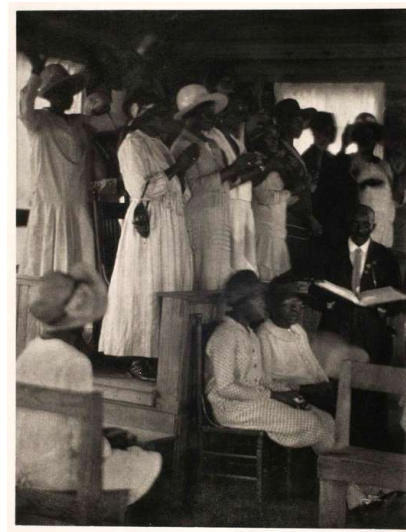


Fig. 52 Doris Ulmann, ca 1929-1931,  
Photogravure for *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

Nevertheless, Peterkin indicates that the Gullah were still vulnerable to having their spiritual practices policed by the white community when she says that while the majority of black congregations only sought to “live right and be just,” there were instances when the “hysterical outbursts...that at times became...so violent that they resembled a return to barbarism” and required the “aid of the military...to repress them



and keep them within bounds” (68). Once again, Peterkin seems to deliberately create a distinct contrast between her text and Ulmann’s images that invites a different interpretation of her text. The images in this chapter depict worshipers ringing the church bell, filing into the church, reading the Bible, as well as standing and singing, making it preposterous to imagine any religious ceremony so “barbarous” as to illicit the need to call in military force to quell “violent” religious fervor. However, the “hysterical outbursts” Peterkin mentions make reference to the “ring shout,” a religious ceremony with deep roots in African culture involving singing combined with a circular dance-like movement that “involved an altered state of consciousness” (Creel 299) akin to possession, but in this case, possession by the Holy Spirit. Peterkin describes a shout in chapter nine, but there is no hysteria or violence in her description, just a textual portrait of “a natural expression of negro joy” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 129). Writer Zora Neale Hurston also witnessed a shout, which she describes in an essay included in *The Sanctified Church*, saying, “shouting is an emotional explosion, responsive to rhythm” and asserts shouting is “a community thing. It survives in concert” (91). This ceremony was not a performance for the white plantation class, and was most often conducted in a chapel-like enclosure called a “praise house” built on plantations during slavery. Given how Gullah populations occupied more isolated areas of the southeastern lowlands, the notion that one of their “shouts” would be so disruptive as to elicit the intervention of the military seems like a deliberate exaggeration made even more preposterous when juxtaposed with Ulmann’s solemn, ethereal images of Gullah worshipers. Further, Peterkin seems to imply that this extreme reaction to “barbarous” events requiring military intervention happened on other plantations, not Lang Syne. Her hyperbolic

description of the shout seemingly pokes fun at those Southern whites who overreact to or were threatened by religious rituals that they didn't understand, whites who were more comfortable controlling black bodies meant only for manual labor, not independent, passionate religious expression.

Those who have witnessed ring shouts do record responses of being initially startled by the passionate nature of the shouts. W.E.B. DuBois referred to a ring shout as a "pythian madness...that lent "terrible reality to song and word" (120). White observers, like northern-born Laura Towne, had a similar reaction. In 1862, she was sent by the Freedmen's Aid Society of Philadelphia to be a teacher on the island of St. Helena in South Carolina, which was populated by a newly freed Gullah community. In one of her letters, she describes a shout in language that Peterkin echoes, "I never saw anything so savage. They call it a religious ceremony, but it seems more like a regular frolic to me" (20). However, the so-called savagery didn't dissuade her from attending more shout ceremonies, which she described similarly.

In fact, the "shout" was not a frolic, but a circular, organized movement that was an important part of Gullah spiritual expression, which some scholars (Cooper, Cree, Crawley, Holmes, Pollitzer, and Hurston to name a few) assert has its roots in African culture, surviving the Middle Passage. Performed mostly in secret by slaves, Crawley explains that it "was used during enslavement to occasion resistance as well as create otherwise words, otherwise worlds, in the midst of the centering gravity of violence and violation" (107). It is this independence of expression that whites in the early twentieth-century South Carolina may have still felt the need to regulate. Therefore, the suggestion of the need for military intervention in an African-American religious ceremony seems to

speak more to fear within the white plantation class, wanting to stop the movement of black bodies for fear that zeal may translate into insurrection or revolt. Rosenbaum explains those, mainly white respondents, who described the shout negatively “may have suppressed a realization that amidst the obvious biblical references in the songs and the strangeness of the shout itself there lay a protest against servitude and an affirmation of human spirit” (35) in the face of the degradation of slavery and the Jim Crow South. Therefore, once again, the combined photographic aesthetic of Ulmann’s images and Peterkin’s text provides a contrast Peterkin uses to further criticize the behavior of the white plantation class with regard to their fear of black religious expression.

In between these provocative juxtapositions of texts and photos, Peterkin includes more detailed textual portraits, the same kind of human documents created by Zitkála-Šá, Cather, and Porter, accompanied by Ulmann’s photographic portraits of specific individuals, many of whom lived and worked on her plantation. While *Roll, Jordan, Roll* features many characters who live and work on her plantation from children to elders, she offers a more detailed picture of individuals like “Uncle,” the foreman, the lady sexton, and the visionary twosome, one of whom is called The Dreamer. These portraits work, not by producing a contrast in juxtaposition with Ulmann’s photos as other plantation sketches do, but by working in concert with Ulmann’s images to present strong, independent, unique individuals of the Gullah community that contest stereotypical images of African Americans, individuals that inspired the creation of the characters in Peterkin’s fiction, many of whom were based on the men and women included in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

For example, the individual known only as “the foreman” (fig. 53) is Peterkin’s first lengthy textual portrait featured in the second and third chapters. In reality, his name is Ellis Sanders and Peterkin uses him and his wife Nanny as the inspiration for the characters Killdee and his wife Rose in her collection of stories, *Green Thursday*. The foreman oversees every detail of the running of the plantation. Peterkin states he acts more like an African tribal chief than a boss, offering orders as well as “advice, praise and encouragement...[and is] ready with consolation” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 47) when members of the plantation population need it. Peterkin asserts that he also commands the respect of the “white people who live in the Big House...for they know he is wise and



Fig. 53 Doris Ulmann, ca1929-1931,  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

measures his words” (31). This is an individual who occupies a leadership position on the plantation, a man whose expertise manages every aspect of the plantation, even making decisions that are respected by the plantation owners. However, in spite of the seriousness of the foreman, Peterkin and Ulmann include a moment of humor in the third

chapter where the foreman discusses his friend's wife's disposition as a typical, stubborn woman who couldn't be reasoned with "after dey set dey head" (47). On the opposite page, there is an image that looks like two yoked mules, a juxtaposition that works as a metaphor to emphasize the mule-headedness of women "after dey set hey head." This is reminiscent of Käsebier's use of an image of yoked oxen as a metaphor for marriage. However, Peterkin will later present detailed portraits, human documents, of independent Gullah women who live their lives on their own terms, like the lady sexton and The Dreamer.

Like "the foreman," Peterkin creates a chapter-length textual portrait of "Uncle," a Gullah man Peterkin describes as "the oldest person in this part of the world" who is also "one of the poorest in this world's goods, but one of the healthiest and happiest" (133). His textual portrait is important for several reasons. If one knows Cudjo Lewis's story (Hurston's extended work about Lewis, *Barracoon*, was finally published in 2018), one can find a few parallels in the lives of Lewis and Uncle, apart from Lewis's African origins, allowing Peterkin to create a linkage through the presence of Lewis's portrait opposite the title page. So, even though Peterkin doesn't produce a non-fiction version of Lewis's story, the photographic aesthetic in the presence of Lewis's portrait creates a tandem relationship between these two men. Both Lewis and Uncle tell their own stories in their own voices. Both men were once slaves. And though Uncle was not born in Africa, Peterkin maintains that his parents "taught him to learn what he could from white people but to live by the old Africa ways" (141). Further, the way Uncle refers to the pre-slavery "Gullah Negroes" links their story to Lewis's story of his capture in Africa when Uncle asserts that the Gullah "were never tricked into slavery with red cloth or glass

beads. Every one of them had to be captured and every one of them fought until he was outdone” (141). And, during the course of their lives, both men buried wives and children, and both lived alone until the end of their long lives. Also like Lewis, Uncle retells his own version of Bible stories in addition to offering his version of history and political events, significant because, as Williams has asserted, “Many white Americans had never imagined that black farming people *had* a point of view” (*A Devil and a Good Woman, Too* 72). Peterkin uses this to preface the following chapter consisting solely of Gullah folklore and conjure wisdom, which after reading the chapter on Uncle makes it possible to hear his voice narrating part of that chapter. Nonetheless, Peterkin first creates a visual, textual portrait of Uncle.

The portrait Peterkin presents of the “oldest person in this part of the world” by stating “Uncle’s legs are short, his body heavy. He owns no shoes” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 133) and later, Peterkin continues her description saying, “Uncle’s features are so shaped

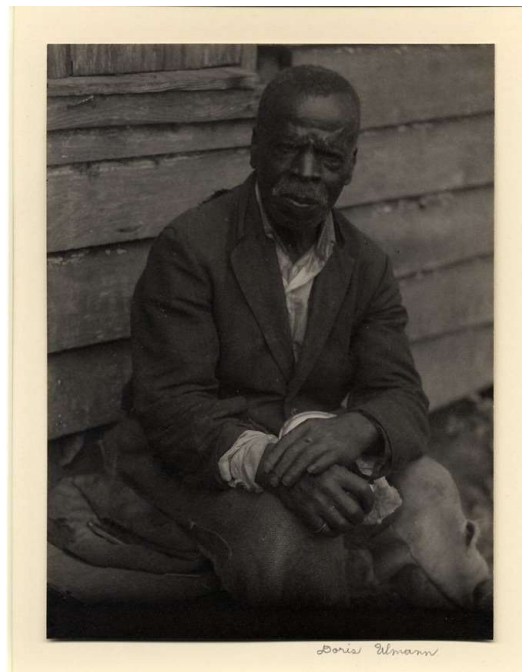


Fig. 54 Doris Ulmann, ca1929-1931  
A slightly altered version of the Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

that they seem unable to register sorrow” (134), though it’s clear he has survived many tragedies, from the loss of his wives and children to surviving fighting with his master during the Civil War. Even at his advanced age, he prides himself on his physical strength. While two photographs of an elderly black man accompany this chapter, it’s not certain they are portraits of Uncle as there’s no identifying information about these images. Nevertheless, Peterkin’s description of him makes it possible to believe they are photographs of him. As such, they lend a gravity to the voice Peterkin reproduces on the page, a voice that is very opinionated. Even if Peterkin avoided directly criticizing the white plantation class and their culpability in the history of slavery, Uncle utters those words for her, condemning both Northern and Southern whites:

Lord, those were sad days, for true. The Yankees up-north and the scalawags down here excused their deviltry by telling the rest of the world that slavery was sinful and they could not stand to have any sin in the United States. They were the very ones that started slavery. The only money they ever made in their lives was by going to Africa and fooling poor ignorant Negros to come aboard their ships by giving them presents...Then they sailed off with them and sold them wherever they could. (140)

Even though Uncle seems to reassure southern whites that he considers northerners to be “white trash,” including Abraham Lincoln, he clearly indicts those who contributed to and maintained the slave trade. In fact, his assessment of the man who was responsible for freeing slaves, like himself, seems tongue-in-cheek when referring to him as a “white trash boy” who worked to become educated and declared that all persons were equal, but who only served the “up-north buckras” because they wanted a “white trash president to

rule the country and make it hard for the bredded people in the South,” meaning Peterkin’s well-bred, white plantation class, who depended on African American labor to maintain their “bredded way of life. After the Civil War, he claims the country was run by “scalawags from up-north and slaves gone crazy with freedom” (140). The presence of some sarcasm here may lie in the fact that Mr. Roosevelt, who Uncle considers the second coming of Christ, was a northerner who “alienated a lot of well-to-do people [in South Carolina] by raising taxes to help the poor” (Williams, *A Devil and a Good Woman, Too* 229), and his wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, “whose portrait hung beside a picture of Jesus in every cabin” on Lang Syne, made it possible for Peterkin to build a school for the blacks there in 1934. So, once again, it is through use of a photographic aesthetic created by Uncle’s story in juxtaposition to the images in this chapter, and the implicit knowledge of Lewis’s story, that Peterkin can voice indirect criticism of the “well-bredded” class. Indeed, at the end of the following chapter’s collection of folklore and conjure wisdom, Peterkin allows the Gullah, presumably Uncle, the last word, indicated by a phrase in quotation marks: “Better to be poor and black and contented with whatever God sends than be ‘vast-rich and white and unrestless’” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 158). This could easily describe Peterkin herself as well as the members of her plantation class, who remained nostalgic for the glory of the Old South, made possible by the slave labor that included individuals like Uncle.

And just as she speaks through the foreman and Uncle, Peterkin’s use of a gendered photographic aesthetic is particularly evident in the way she presents portraits of two independent Gullah women. In spite of the humor directed toward women’s stubbornness by the foreman, Peterkin includes portraits of several strong, independent



Gullah women, though there are two women in particular who are featured more prominently. In chapter six, which features images of Gullah worshipers and their religious practices, Peterkin highlights a specific individual, the “lady sexton,” whose textual portrait is accompanied by Ulmann’s photographs, images that closely depict the individual Peterkin describes even though, like all the other images in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, there is no identification of the individual. Her story is then followed by an account of two old women, one of whom is called “The Dreamer,” who embark on a journey that places them well outside the racial and gender norms of that time, including gender norms applied to white women. They are the kind of strong, Gullah women Peterkin’s fictional characters are based upon, the kind of women Peterkin gains agency through as, in one way or another, they demonstrate a strength and independence beyond the cultural gender norms that she struggled against.

One of those women is the elderly “lady sexton” or caretaker of the Methodist church. Like other individuals in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, she is not named but is described as an older, independent woman charged with the care of maintaining the church. Her many duties include preparing the church for funerals and religious celebrations, ringing the church bell calling congregants to worship, and helping to teach the children of the congregation to become “mannersable,” a word Peterkin includes in quotations to indicate the lady sexton’s own words (95). While Uncle makes mention of his own physical strength, the lady sexton boasts about her physical prowess, taking pride in it, declaring “every sinew in her body is ‘bedcord strong,’ meaning that they are strong as the stout cords which once served beds for springs” (95) and because of that strength, “[s]he has never known what it is to be sick or to feel ‘po’ly” (96). She then uses that

strength to help other women when they need it, able to plow a straight line like any man, also reminiscent of Cather's *Antonia*, who took pride in her own physical strength.

In addition, like Uncle, she lives alone. Her husband is long dead and she has declared "she's forever done with men" (96) except for Jesus. Further, it seems like Peterkin lets the lady sextant's story offer a response to the foreman's notion that women



Fig. 55 Doris Ulmann, ca1929-1931,  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

were mule-like, who couldn't be reasoned with "after dey set dey head" (47), a sentiment that is juxtaposed with Ulmann's image of mules. The lady sextant claims that when it comes to men, she "tried them out...but found them all a triflin', sometime lot, good for nothing but to mess a woman up, spend all she makes and then keep her whipped down with worryation" (96). In fact, she actually prefers the company of livestock, particularly the company of her ox, Sampson, over the company of humans. Ironically, the ox is one of the few characters in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* who has a name while the foreman, the one who runs the plantation, remains nameless. This could well be Peterkin's jab at the men in her own life after the betrayal of her father and husband regarding her sterilization, her growing dissatisfaction with her husband William Peterkin, as well as after her failed

long-time affair with the New York novelist, Irving Fineman. Like the lady sexton, many of the men in her life contributed to Peterkin feeling “whipped down with worryation.” Therefore, writing about a figure like the lady sexton, happy to be independent from men, gave Peterkin a sense of agency.

Also like Uncle, the lady sexton is strong in her opinions, as seen in her opinion of men, and in her personal knowledge of things like the natural world around her, and she values that knowledge more than the ability to read or write. Having lived alone for years, she is comfortable with her independence, plowing her own fields, living on her own terms. The lady sexton claims she’s “bedcord strong” and that “she already knows more than she can practice, and certainly her mind is stored with verses of hymns and passages of Scripture” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 95). Peterkin describes the lady sexton’s one symbolic concession to conventional gender norms in her willingness to wear a corset and high-heeled shoes to church and to other religious rituals even though it “cramps her and cuts off her wind and makes her breath short,” but she does so because “[a] woman is due to look nice in the house of God” (99). Even though the corset shapes her body in a way that so changes her figure to everyone’s “surprisement,” the moment she leaves church, she reclaims her body and its comfort by removing the corset, heels, and hat. “Then she gets out her pipe, lights it, and goes the rest of the way in comfort” (99), comfortable in her own skin.

Ulmann has provided a striking photographic image of an older woman plowing a field behind her ox (fig. 56), presumably a portrait of the lady sexton. The image of the plow in the field and the woman behind it, accompanied by Peterkin’s description of her, evoke Cather’s photographic aesthetic in the way she presents the character of *Ántonia* in



Fig. 56 Doris Ulmann, ca 1933  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

*My Ántonia*. Knowing Peterkin's admiration of Cather's work, it's clear the strength and independence of these two women, the lady sexton and Ántonia, inspire Peterkin. The lady sexton seems representative of the many strong, independent Gullah women in her fiction. Thus, it is not difficult to see why Peterkin, a woman who straddled two worlds and never felt completely comfortable in either the New York literary scene or the world of the Southern, white plantation class, gained agency through a character like the lady sextant. The lady sextant, in spite of the cultural strictures governing poor, rural African American women, lived life on her own terms, something Peterkin tried to do but eventually abandoned toward the end of her life when she retreated into the safety of her own plantation class. The same can be said about Peterkin gaining agency through "The Dreamer," who also exhibits extraordinary strength and independence.

In addition to the lady sexton, Peterkin also features two Gullah women, one of whom is known as "The Dreamer," who move even further beyond traditional gender norms, particularly for African American women at that time. However, Sterling Brown,

who reviewed *Roll, Jordan, Roll for Opportunity*, *Journal of Negro Life* in February of 1934, claims Peterkin, in telling the Dreamer's story, may have appropriated an anecdote about Aunt Nancy Vaughn, a legendary black woman living in the Black Belt in Alabama. Nancy Vaughn is a Dreamer-like individual whose story is recounted by Carl Cramer in a piece that appeared in *Opportunity* magazine in March of 1932, "The Prophetess of Eutaw," before *Roll, Jordan, Roll* was published. Sterling's claim that Peterkin "repeats, with only minor changes" (59), the Prophetess's story, down to the white robes Peterkin's Dreamer wears is accurate. Nevertheless, even if it is an appropriated story, the Dreamer still provides Peterkin with another opportunity to indict her own plantation class, as well as members of the Klan, just as she did previously when making the unsettling comparison of Klan robes with the robes of candidates for baptism. Unlike Klan members or candidates for baptism, the Dreamer lives in her robes, as a nun dons a habit. Her "habit" is symbolic of the fact that she is driven daily by a spiritual force, unlike the Klan's robes that are symbolic of bigotry and hate. The fact that the Dreamer's robes are made from white sheets seems like a deliberate effort to take back a symbol that is more often associated with racism and violence, particularly with the rise of the Klan in the 1920s. Unlike the sheet-wearing Klan members whose violent, secretive activities are directed by a grand wizard, the Dreamer lives at the direction of the divine voice she hears.

While the lady sexton's story spans a chapter and a half, chapter eight is devoted to the Dreamer and her neighbor, two old Gullah women who embark on a divine-inspired pilgrimage, though it is the Dreamer who is treated with greater detail. As mentioned before, Peterkin's article in *American Magazine* in 1928, "Seeing Things,"

explains how her life on the plantation and her interaction with the Gullahs living on it taught her a new way of seeing because “[t]hese blacks could not only see but also distinguish; their ears knew how to hear, and their bodies had been taught to serve them” (included in *The Collected Short Stories* 66). If there is any individual who embodies this, it is The Dreamer, whose ears were attuned to a voice she heard in a dream, the voice of the “Great-I-Am” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 108) that she obeyed without question, a voice that sent her and her neighbor on a sacred pilgrimage. If Peterkin, herself, felt uncomfortable in a life split between embracing her writing persona and her role as a plantation mistress, she could claim agency through The Dreamer, an older woman who was secure in knowing her purpose, particularly toward the end of her life.

The Dreamer, who heard the voice of the “Great-I-Am,” was a woman who raised a family with her husband, a Baptist preacher. At the time she heard the voice, she was a widow who lived alone. The voice instructed her in many things: it identified hypocritical believers, advised against eating meat or wearing shoes, directed her to wear only white robes made of “snow-white bed sheets” (109), and finally, the voice told her that the Pope at that time was going to die and that she must journey to Rome to warn him. In order to pay for this journey, the voice also told her and her neighbor to sell their homes, which made the neighbor’s grown children “powerfully upset and cross” (110), but they remained steadfast. Eventually, in spite of much initial opposition and with the support of their families, she and her neighbor made the journey into a world where they saw “very few people [who] were not white” (113) and delivered the warning. As they sailed for home, they got word that the Pope had died. That same voice also told the Dreamer as she sailed for home that “her work on earth would soon be done and God would send a

chariot of fire to take her home” (115), though that wouldn’t happen for years. She and her neighbor were treated with kindness throughout this sacred journey and at home, their reputations “spread until they provide[d] the plantation preachers with themes for eloquent sermons” (108). Such a journey made by two older, rural, African-American women was unheard of at that time, far beyond the cultural and gender norms for their time, but their commitment to what they deemed their destiny led them forward. Even without Ulmann’s portrait of an older woman in white robes, Peterkin has created a striking textual portrait of the Dreamer’s quiet strength. However, Ulmann’s images of the Dreamer in her white robes are dramatically poignant, that quiet strength is observable in her posture, in her countenance, and in her robes that seem to emit an ethereal light, as in Ulmann’s images of the baptismal candidates. Further, they are reminders of the connection Peterkin made between the Gullah’s white robes and Klan robes in the beginning of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, once again evoking criticism of the plantation class and the racial disparities between that class, the Gullah, and other rural African Americans.

In the chapter on the Dreamer, there are presumably two photographs of her (both unlabeled) although it’s possible one of the images is of her neighbor and traveling companion. Even though Peterkin never includes a physical description of either The Dreamer or the neighbor, their attire, the glowing white robes made from white sheets, identifies them. However, in both images, the faces are similar enough to suggest that both photographs are of the same woman. In addition, since Peterkin tells the story of their pilgrimage primarily from the perspective of the Dreamer, that also suggests both portraits are of the Dreamer. In one portrait, she is sitting in a chair turned slightly to



Fig. 57 Doris Ulmann, ca 1933  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

the side, cloaked in her white robes, hands folded while looking directly into the camera. In the second photograph (fig. 57), she is standing to one side, her body is in profile, but she is standing straight, looking directly at the photographer. She is solemn, self-possessed, hands crossed in front of her. She is shrouded in a kind of quiet holiness as the voice had also instructed her to “keep silent and let her friend tell what they had done” (113). Her position in the frame, slightly right of center, and her strikingly white robes, emphasize the dark space behind her. That negative space also seems to have a presence of its own, suggestive of the supernatural force that compels her. And once again, though the Klan and their white robes are never mentioned in this chapter, her previous comparison of the robes of “Negro candidates for baptism,” with the “long white robes of the Ku Klux Klan” (19) in the opening chapter remains even more incongruous when compared with the robes of the Dreamer, who achieves the status of a holy person upon



her return, particularly when her prophecy of the pope's death comes true during their voyage home.

Prior to this journey, the Dreamer and her neighbor appealed to an unnamed white man from the next village about how to proceed with their mission. This man laughs at them and calls them crazy, but offers to buy their property and let their grown children live there as sharecroppers. Then, "if the two women ever came back" he'd sell them back their land for the same price. The white man's wording suggests that he didn't expect them to come back, in which case, their families would have permanently lost their property at a time when land ownership was still primarily in the hands of Southern whites. It's also notable that Peterkin never resolves this. We don't know if The Dreamer and her neighbor got their lands and homes back, unless Peterkin's comment saying that upon returning home "they were the same as before they went" (115) could imply they were able to buy back their land, but that hint of uncertainty adds to the perilous position to which even holy Gullahs were subjected. However, in Carmer's story about Nancy Vaughn that is also included in his collection of anecdotes, *Stars Fell on Alabama*, he recounts that Aunt Nancy's neighbor, Sister Jane (a character who corresponds to The Dreamer's neighbor), never got her land back, "It was sold when the mortgage came due" (157). In other parts of Carmer's account, Aunt Nancy describes being jailed for standing on the street in Birmingham and prophesying that "the folks there were wicked and a great trouble was coming to destroy them" (157). Peterkin's Dreamer remained silent for the most part, content to let her neighbor recount their pilgrimage. Heaven may have been assured to all these sainted women, but landownership and freedom of expression in the company of white people was not. If Peterkin appropriated Carmer's account of Aunt

Nancy, one can only speculate as to why, including why she left out aspects of her story that were more directly critical of whites' treatment of African Americans.

Carl Carmer was a well-known writer at the same time that Peterkin was enjoying notoriety. Further, they traveled in the same literary circles, so it's reasonable to assume they were aware of each other's work, particularly since they both appeared in *Opportunity* magazine. If Peterkin was indeed appropriating Carmer's account, turning Aunt Nancy into the Dreamer, why did she leave out this individual's mistreatment by members of the white community? While both writers emphasize the symbolism of the white robes, robes that Peterkin had already used to draw a stark contrast between those worn by baptismal candidates, The Dreamer, and the Klan, Peterkin's account omits the harsher elements in the lives of rural African Americans and the Gullahs on her plantation. However, Carmer was a Northerner. Born in New York state, like Ulmann, he traveled to the South to collect material that he eventually collected into *Stars Fell on Alabama*. Unlike Peterkin, he didn't live in the area he wrote about and didn't face the same condemnation Peterkin endured for writing about a subject considered unsuitable by the white plantation class. Even though by the time *Roll, Jordan, Roll* was published Peterkin was celebrated more than censured for her work, she may still have felt compelled to avoid any outright criticism of her own class, which could explain why she excised the passages in Aunt Nancy's story that were directly critical of southern whites. We may not know why Peterkin appropriated Carmer's account of Aunt Nancy, borrowing her white robes to create the story of the Dreamer. In that regard, she is as silent as the Dreamer. However, her text combined with Ulmann's images harness the

photographic aesthetic that provides a vehicle through which she could, once again, indirectly indict her own white plantation class.

Even while Peterkin used this aesthetic to levy indirect criticism of the southern, white plantation class, there were also problematic areas in her relationship with the Gullahs, in spite of her intimate connection to them. Although Peterkin attributes her new way of seeing to the Gullah population who formed the core of her oeuvre, there were times when Peterkin could see, but could not necessarily recognize her own failings with regard to race, meaning she still had moments of blindness. Indeed, she failed to utilize the gendered photographic aesthetic demonstrated by Ulmann when she stepped behind a camera herself, and in doing so, not only cost her a friendship, it raises graver questions that further complicate Peterkin's relationships with the Gullahs on her plantation.

Shortly after the publication of her novel *Black April*, Peterkin's publisher asked her to provide photographs of her plantation and the people on it for promotional purposes. As part of that endeavor, Peterkin picked up a camera and shot some pictures on her plantation. In one photo, "she casually suggested that Mary Weeks pick up a large wooden washtub and balance it on her head. Mary did as she was asked," but what Julia didn't know is that this "would eventually cost her dearly" (Williams, *A Devil and a Good Woman, Too* 125). At the time she took these pictures, she was working on the novel that would win the Pulitzer, *Scarlet Sister Mary*, which she claimed she based on the life of Mary Weeks, a Gullah woman who lived and worked on Lang Syne, a woman who Peterkin claimed was her "best black friend" (130). Peterkin even implied that *Scarlet Sister Mary* was a fictional biography of Weeks, which was upsetting to Weeks's family, partly because of what Peterkin left out and partly because Peterkin chose to use

Weeks's name following the term "scarlet," which implies that the protagonist has loose morals. In fact, the morality of members of the Peterkins family were in question. Mary Weeks bore two children fathered by Peterkin's brothers-in-law. Williams says Peterkin wanted to include that information, to tell the truth about the darker areas of Mary's life, areas that point to her husband's family's culpability in the treatment of the blacks living on the Peterkin plantation, but by the time the novel was published, she had winnowed out all such references (130).

It's interesting that Ulmann provides an image of an older woman balancing a tub on her head in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, though it's not believed to be Mary Weeks. This image appears in the first chapter, ironically, opposite a page that delineates the "black social scale" (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 20) among the Gullah. If Peterkin was aware enough of this social scale to write about it, then she would have known that asking Mary Weeks to pose with a tub on her head as water carriers do, placed her in a lower position than she occupied on that black social scale. Peterkin may have taken a photograph of Weeks in this way because when the character of Mary in *Scarlet Sister Mary* first appears, she is hauling water. However, as an older woman, this task was considered beneath her. Nonetheless, Peterkin's photo of her appeared in a review of *Scarlet Sister Mary* in the *Boston Evening Transcript* in 1927 and later in the *Columbia Record* in South Carolina in 1928. One of Weeks's daughters, Minnie Logan, was living in Columbia at the time and when she saw the review in the paper she "exploded. The photographs were demeaning. Her mother no longer carried water that way, for white people or anyone else" (*A Devil and a Good Woman, Too* 131). However, Williams suggests that this response that may have been fueled by long-standing anger or hurt over Weeks having been willingly or

unwillingly impregnated by members of the Peterkin family, producing two half-Peterkin daughters.

Williams points out that “[a] black woman in Mary’s position could not easily have refused the sons of her employer” (132), but the details of the circumstances of the relationships between Weeks and Peterkin’s brothers-in-law are not clear, and neither is the reason why Peterkin would want to include such private, even painful information that points to an ongoing abuse of power by the Peterkins with regard to Weeks and her family. Given Weeks’s position as an employee of the Peterkin family at a time when rural African Americans in the South were still subject to different forms of enslavement in the era of Jim Crow, one could argue that Weeks was raped even if there was consent because of the unequal power dynamic between the dominating white plantation class and the poor, rural Gullah who worked for them. Weeks’s grandson, who was a young child when he witnessed Peterkin photographing his grandmother, said he “remembers his grandmother as meek, exploited, and terrified of white people” (132), although other relatives maintain that rape may be too strong of a word to describe the dynamic between Mary Weeks and the Peterkin brothers. Nevertheless, the questions remain as to whether Peterkin had planned to use that information to shame her husband’s family, and even her own husband for his infidelities, and did Peterkin plan to use a fictionalized form of this information, without permission from Weeks.

There are no direct answers to these questions, but whatever her reasons, her treatment of Weeks exposes a grievous insensitivity on Peterkin’s part, a blinkering of that new way of seeing the Gullah taught her, that complicates her relationship with the Gullah she claims to admire. In spite of the manner of their conception, the half-Peterkin

children, Bessie and Essie, were accepted as part of Weeks's family. In the end, though, Weeks's daughter Minnie convinced her mother to move away from Lang Syne, purportedly ending Weeks's friendship with Peterkin. This seems to have had an impact on Peterkin as Williams reports that Peterkin never told her literary friends that Weeks was no longer living on her plantation (132).



Fig. 58 *Mary Weeks with William Peterkin III*, photographer unknown, circa late 1930s, close-up from a digital copy provided by Peterkin biographer, Susan Williams, given to her by William George Peterkin IV



Fig. 59 Doris Ulmann, ca 1933  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

Although Ulmann's image of an older woman with a tub on her head is not identified as Mary Weeks, it's possible Ulmann may have approximated the photo Peterkin had taken. The unnamed individual depicted in fig. 59 is an older woman who looks squarely into the camera, unsmiling. By framing her image between what appears to be a tall door and the corner of a building and possibly another door, there's an emphasis on her verticality, which in turn creates a sense of the burden of the weight of those tubs on her head. The framing also contributes to a sense of the narrowness of a

confined space, perhaps symbolizing the narrowness of possibilities for Gullahs living in the South at that time. It could also represent the narrow-sightedness of Peterkin herself, whose lack of a gendered photographic aesthetic, in this case, cost her an important friendship. However, a side-by-side comparison of Ulmann's image (fig. 59) and a close-up of a photograph Mary Weeks (fig. 58) given to Peterkin's biographer by Peterkin's great-grandson, William George Peterkin IV, reveals facial similarities, particularly in the shape of the neck, the line of the shoulders, the shape of the mouth and the cheekbones, that suggest the individual with the tubs on her head, who appears in *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, may have indeed been Mary Weeks. If so, that raises an interesting question. If Peterkin lost her friendship because of the photograph she took of Weeks, why would she or Ulmann have Weeks pose a second time with those contentious tubs symbolic of the lowest rung on the Gullah social scale? There are two possible reasons for this.

First, Peterkin may have felt that she had nothing left to lose since Weeks was gone and no longer a friend. Or secondly, could Peterkin have been indirectly criticizing herself by acknowledging the problematic position in which she depicted Weeks? In light of Weeks's family's reaction to her depiction of Mary, it seems Peterkin may have been admitting to her insensitive treatment of Weeks when she writes on the page opposite the possible image of Mary, "It is not easy to deceive their shrewd eyes or their keen, quick judgment of people, white or black, yet they are 'closed-mouthed' about the shortcomings of their friends and employers" (20). In this case, Peterkin's shortcoming was failing to apply the kind of gendered photographic aesthetic Ulmann utilized when Peterkin photographed and used an image of Mary as publicity. Ulmann's photographic

aesthetic, like the other photographers discussed previously, involved treating her subjects with respect and presenting them as “human documents.” Peterkin’s photo of Weeks, possibly published without permission, negated any kind of exchange and cast Weeks back into the margins of the “other.” Therefore, using a similar image taken by Ulmann, who may have been unaware of the hierarchy of Gullah society and a water carrier’s lower status within that hierarchy, could have been seen as an opportunity for Peterkin to apologize to Weeks and her family since Ulmann’s photographs were considered art, but it still depicts Weeks performing the task of someone on one of the lower rungs of Gullah social hierarchy.

Peterkin’s new way of seeing included a blind spot in her mistreatment of Mary Weeks, as opposed to the fictional character based on Weeks, but figures such as the Dreamer and the lady sextant were still portrayed as strong individuals through whom she gained agency in order to be able to push beyond the accepted gender norms at that time. Williams states that, fundamentally, Peterkin felt that “writing was a male activity” (32). At that time in the Deep South, and in other places as the New Woman (see endnote 1) emerged, women were still expected, as in Käsebier’s time, to remain in the private sphere where they were to adhere to accepted gender norms, which limited women’s rolls to wives and mothers. Julia, herself describes her own private sphere on the plantation: “I live pretty far away from things and people...Here, one needs no vocabulary nor imagination. How can I best acquire them” (32). Figures like Mary Weeks and the other individuals on Lang Syne provided the subject matter and the means whereby Peterkin could step outside the strictures of gender norms. By writing about them, Peterkin “felt ready to emulate Mary Weeks, to do whatever it took to be discovered, to be seen by



men,” preferably powerful men who could help her become successful as a writer.

Williams quotes Peterkin’s notes for future stories where Peterkin claims that in spite of having “a lurid past” Mary Weeks also “has had every adventure a woman can have with men, and today she is the strongest, straightest, happiest woman. Her children love her” (32), children fathered by different individuals, including Peterkin’s brothers-in-law. Plus, like the Dreamer’s pilgrimage, Peterkin’s trips to New York to connect with other artists may not have been divinely inspired, but they were vital in confirming and strengthening her identity as a writer, an activity still outside accepted gender norms, particularly within the genteel plantation class.

It is perhaps Mary Weeks’ status as a happy mother with many children who love her that Peterkin envied most since she was denied the possibility of multiple children in her own life. Therefore, when Peterkin explains in chapter fourteen of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, which focuses specifically on Gullah children, “Children bring good luck to a house, and a childless woman is pitied whether she is married or single” (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 172), she may be referring to herself, a woman who is pitied for having only one child. Further, “Married couples and husbandless women who already have large families will adopt as many children as they can acquire and raise them as carefully as the fruit of their bodies” (172). By creating the character of Scarlet Sister Mary based on Mary Weeks, the character’s fertility was another way Peterkin could gain agency and perhaps feel less pitied. In spite of her impulse to step outside accepted gender norms, Peterkin was furious that she was denied the opportunity to have more children. No men made such decisions for Gullah women, at least not with the Gullah women in Peterkin’s fiction. Mary was able to have the family that Peterkin could not, and, perhaps with the exception of those

fathered by Peterkins' brothers-in-law, had them on her own terms. However, in spite of Peterkin's insistence on happy Gullah children, there are glaring bits of contrasting information folded into this chapter that belie the image of happy children that Peterkin recounts and suggests that she may be levying her harshest, yet still indirect, indictment of the white plantation class.

This chapter includes seven images, and in only two images, the children are smiling. Most of the children in these images have sober expressions, which provides a stark contrast to Peterkin's lighthearted descriptions of the children. Perhaps this is because as soon as Gullah children can walk, they are put to work, older children help to raise the younger children and help in the field. In further contrast, while Peterkin describes how Gullah parents discipline their children in order to make them "mannersable," including "threaten[ing] their children recklessly" (176). Although Peterkin assures that these parents' threats "rarely bear any fruit," she then lists the varying kinds of punishments that Gullah children may endure at the hands of their own

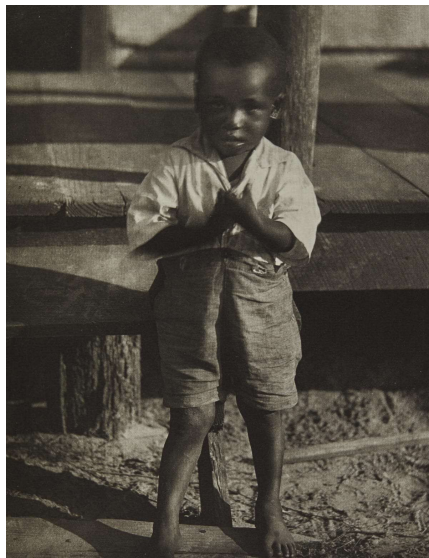


Fig. 60 Doris Ulmann, ca 1933  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

parents, including the one applied to a repeatedly disobedient child: “[A] child that persists in it [disobedience] needs to be put into a sack and hung to a rafter and thrashed until blood leaks out and drains off the meanness that causes it” (176). This comparison creates the same effect as Peterkin’s comparison of baptismal robes and Klan robes. Did Peterkin actually witness this form of punishment? If so, it almost makes her next statement incredulous when she explains that “hardships and troubles and severe punishments are soon forgotten” and the “children go about their duties with unfailing cheerfulness” (179). It’s believable that the Gullahs may have used their own brand of discipline on their children in order to prepare them for a harsh, unsympathetic world dominated by whites. Peterkin even indicates this by declaring how much more dependable black children are in comparison to white children (175), because they must be taught that “[d]anger waits everywhere, in everything, and [black] children must know how to avoid it” (176), though placing a child in a sack and beating them until blood



Fig. 61 Doris Ulmann, ca 1933  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

seeps through the sack is more suggestive of the treatment slaves endured, as well as those at the mercy of the white, Jim Crow South. This horrific image of child discipline that Peterkin creates in text stands opposite an image of a young girl with her back against a wall (fig. 61). Her expression is not happy, but pensive, perhaps even wary, as she looks to the side, with a dark expression that contrasts the bright bow in her hair. Once again, the juxtaposition of Peterkin's text with Ulmann's photograph opens up a subtext made possible by the photographic aesthetic in Ulmann's images. This makes Peterkin's remarks in this chapter all the more ominous: "In spite of the dangers and hardships that beset them, black children seem happy" (188). This marks a slight change in tone from earlier in the chapter where she assures the reader that in spite of severe punishments, the children are unfailingly cheerful. In the end, the message is clear; Gullah children are taught that "bearing heavy burdens makes for strength," strength they would need as poor, black adults subject to abuses in the Jim Crow South.

In much darker anecdotes involving newborn children in chapters sixteen and eighteen, two Gullah women become pregnant by men who reject them and both their babies die. In the story about the daughter of the head asparagus cutter in chapter sixteen, a baby dies under curious circumstances in a narrative fraught by a frenzied web of conjuring. In the deaf Gullah woman's story in chapter eighteen, she suffocates her own newborn child because, she reasons, "if she fed it with breast milk that was poisoned with hate and misery it would have died just the same, and died a harder death." These episodes frame chapter seventeen, which is about the "bury league" and the Gullah rituals around death and ghosts, and are in direct contrast to what Peterkin recounted earlier, that childless women are pitied more than single mothers. The children of both these women

seem destined to not bring luck and are reminders of helplessness or bitterness toward men that betrayed them. In the deaf Gullah woman's case, she follows her baby in death after suffering a terrible illness. One can only wonder if Peterkin's reason for including such starkly tragic stories. Was Peterkin expressing her own bitterness for feeling betrayed by the men in her life who robbed her of any future children?

Through these anecdotes in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* and her fictional stories, Elizabeth Robeson believes, "Peterkin's genius derives from her decision to tell her story from under the distracting cover of dark skins" (770). Porter, too, borrowed the cover of dark skin to gain agency through her protagonist in "María Concepción," in order to process her own grief over the loss of a child after having been betrayed by a lover. While Porter also uses María Concepción's actions as a form of primitive justice to restore what has been lost, there is no justice for the spurned daughter of the asparagus cutter or the young deaf Gullah woman. There was no justice for Peterkin when she was robbed of the chance for future children. As scholar Gonny Van Beek-Van Overbeek observes, "We do not need a whole lot of imagination, once we know the story of Peterkin's life, to read behind the lines and to discover the rage Julia herself must have felt after she had discovered she had been sterilized" (73). Indeed, most of her female Gullah characters both real and fictional, have not only survived betrayal by men, they live full lives as independent beings, flouting gender norms. They are devils and good women, too, as Peterkin hoped to be through them. However, her agency through descriptions of the Gullah, through characters like the lady sexton, and the Dreamer is only made more poignant when she borrows the mantle of Ulmann's gendered photographic aesthetic.

Again, the juxtaposition of the images in these stories, or even the lack of images, seems undeniably intentional. There are four images in chapter sixteen, all of asparagus packers, none of whom are smiling. In chapter seventeen about the bury league, there are three photographs, one of which depicts two children together on horseback, which is eerily prescient as a reminder of the deaths of two babies in the chapters that frame it. The final photograph in this chapter directly precedes the chapter about the deaf Gullah woman. That photograph is even more prescient as it is an image of a grave. Curiously,



Fig. 62 Doris Ulmann, ca 1933  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

chapter eighteen, which recounts the deaf Gullah’s woman’s tragic story, contains no images. Its juxtaposition to the story of infanticide and death makes chapter eighteen’s lack of images even more haunting. Finally, Peterkin makes an abrupt turn back toward happier subjects like “negro holidays” for the remaining chapters.

The final chapters in this collaboration between Julia Peterkin and Doris Ulmann describe Gullah holidays and ends with a description of a Gullah Christmas celebration. Peterkin refers to this holiday as “the bright crown of the year,” a joyous weeklong event

involving speeches, storytelling, singing, shouting, and prayer, a “span of happy days and nights lying between joys and sorrows of the year left behind and those of the New Year ahead,” (244) which seems fitting given the mountainous sorrows recounted in all the previous chapters evoking poverty, sickness, chain gangs, murder, child abuse, and infanticide. On the heels of the tragic death of the deaf Gullah woman and her newborn, Peterkin offers the celebration of the birth of Jesus. On one hand, this provides some relief, but the impact of the juxtaposition of images and text and the subtext that juxtaposition reveals throughout this book lingers, even while Peterkin gives the Gullah the last word “as they lift the last song up to heaven: ‘Jesus is born in Bethlehem! Peace of earth, good will toward men!’” (251). The last image in this last chapter is of an empty hearth decorated for Christmas, but unpopulated by any images of reveling Gullahs. In that regard, this image of the hearth is in the home where an elderly Gullah woman, Old Maum, lived until she died, is connected to the previous image devoid of people, that of



Fig. 63 Doris Ulmann, ca 1933  
Photogravure from *Roll, Jordan, Roll*

the grave of another Gullah woman. This further suggests Peterkin's use of a photographic aesthetic to indicate the presence of a critical subtext indirectly indicting her own white, plantation class and their complicity in the way Southern, rural African Americans were treated during the Jim Crow era. With two images connected to death and Peterkin's descriptions of the loss of children, Peterkin is indirectly indicting not only the men in her own life, but also the plantation class's roll in perpetuating the mistreatment of rural African Americans, creating an environment that helped push new generations of Gullahs, among others, off plantations to find new livelihoods in the industrial north, leaving behind empty hearths like the image in the last chapter of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

After photographing rural, southern African Americans, Ulmann turned her camera toward the people in Appalachian communities. Along with John Jacob Niles, a native Kentuckian, musician, composer, and American folk ballad collector, who worked as her assistant and her "interpreter" much like Peterkin was her introduction to and interpreter for the Gullah, Ulmann photographed craftsmen and women in remote areas of the Appalachians. By the time Peterkin finished the text of *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, she was beginning her retreat back into her role as plantation mistress and away from her identity as a writer. Williams even adds that at that time "Julia had cut herself off from the black men and women who served her. Many of her favorites had died in the past few years or, like Mary, moved away" (229), which cut off her connection to the subjects who were a vital part of her identity as a writer. Finally, while all this was happening, Doris Ulmann, who had been plagued by infirmity most of her life, died in August, 1934.



In spite of the end of their friendship following Ulmann's death, they left behind a legacy, a collaboration that was one of the first of its kind, a legacy that is a testament to the powerful ways that images and text could work together to profound effect, where the collaboration transcends the work of two individual artists and becomes a conversation between two artistic genres. This is a conversation that certainly accomplishes more than the photographs or the text alone, but allows a greater message to be communicated through a gendered photographic aesthetic operating through the juxtaposition of image and text. Even if it was not the intent of photographer nor the writer to effect social change through their collaboration, theirs will always remain the first collaborative project ahead of many similar projects to follow, in spite of devilish complications of race and class both women artists negotiated.

On one hand, Sterling A. Brown, an African American poet, scholar, and literary critic, responded to Peterkin's work, even before she won the Pulitzer, in a review appearing in 1927 in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*. In this review, he states that future black writers should pay attention to Peterkin's work in bringing Gullah life to light because "From her we might get a hint of the need of going back to the soil; of digging our roots deeply therein...If we do decide to try this, there could be few better mentors than Julia Peterkin" (148). However, some of the responses to *Roll, Jordan, Roll* by contemporary critics are less enthusiastic, particularly when addressing its perceived paternalistic tone. Robeson describes it as "a plantation eulogy cleverly presented as documentary" (764) and that "just when literary modernism flowered in the South, Peterkin regressed as a writer, turning back toward pastoralism to eulogize the vanishing world that had paradoxically eviscerated and sustained her" (770). In fact, attention to the

work of this successful, pioneering Pulitzer Prize-winning author is what has vanished, except where her work couples with Doris Ulmann's photographs.

*Roll, Jordan, Roll* is a collaboration that embodies every element of a gendered photographic aesthetic. It is a physical collaboration, the first of its kind produced by a creative partnership between two women who used their art to push against the gender norms of their time. Both women gained a kind of agency through their poignant representations of their subjects. However, most importantly, it is the juxtaposition of Peterkin's text with Ulmann's images that allows for a radically different reading of Peterkin's text as indirect social criticism rather than the "plantation eulogy" (Robeson 764) that dismissed *Roll, Jordan, Roll* as emblematic of Peterkin's "turning back toward paternalism" (770). Yet in spite of the importance of their groundbreaking collaboration, to this day, there remains only one scholarly biography of Peterkin published in 1997, and a handful of articles on her work, though now there is also a documentary, "Cheating the Stillness," that appeared in 2009. As a result, Peterkin and her work remain relatively unknown.

Similarly, in spite of Ulmann's success during her lifetime, it's only recently that a significant number of her photographs were presented in an exhibition curated by Sarah Kate Gillespie titled, "Vernacular Modernism," in November of 2018 at the University of Georgia's Georgia Museum of Art, the first comprehensive exhibit of her work. By referring to her work as vernacular modernism, the curators were addressing the marginal place in which her work resides, as a combination of Pictorialism, Modernism, and Documentarianism, though "she was most aligned with those artists of her era who were engaging in a useable past" (Gillespie 23) because she photographed those common,

vernacular subjects who also occupied the margins of American culture. She was one of the first photographers to produce images of subjects like rural African Americans as fine art, subjects who Ulmann felt helped define American-ness. Her collaboration with Peterkin featuring those images remains an important, even if little known, contribution to the history of women photographers and women writers. Indeed, as Gillespie notes in the catalog accompanying Ulmann's exhibition, while "the pairing of writings on and photographs of rural people would become increasingly popular as the 1930s progressed" (93), it remains "the only one produced by two women [before Bayard Wooten's collaboration with Muriel Sheppard] and the only one that focuses exclusively on African American subjects. In this, it is unique for its period and a groundbreaking work" (94). These are two good women artists, bedeviled by an often unequal exchange of gazes between themselves and their subjects, an unequal exchange that was exacerbated by race and class at time and in a setting that featured gaping divisions between races and classes. Yet, within that flawed space, their connection provided the opportunity to utilize a gendered photographic aesthetic that created a new way of seeing their subjects and a possible new way of reading Peterkin's text through their collaboration on *Roll, Jordan, Roll*.

## Conclusion

### Expanding the Web: The Legacy of a New Way of Seeing

There is an important legacy left by all of the writers and photographers discussed here, and their web of connection extends into the present where they maintain an influence on contemporary women writers and photographers, even while some, like Ulmann and Peterkin, are not currently known or studied as much as Modotti or Cather. I've shown that by establishing a web of connections, an important element of a gendered photographic aesthetic that all of them have implemented in varying ways and degrees, they connect themselves and their work with each other, creating a space for transcultural exchanges or an exchange of gazes with non-white subjects. In doing so, these artists created new ways of seeing, just as Dos Passos suggested, by breaking up "old processes and patterns" (617) in cultural production that tended to exclude or marginalize them, or treated them with less gravity than white male artists. They contributed to the "evolving consciousness" (617) in the early twentieth century by developing a visual grammar that allowed them to define themselves as artists, to write their own versions of history, and to create photographic and textual records of things, of human documents, and of cultures worth seeing, subjects that often lived in the margins of mainstream culture. They pushed beyond accepted gender norms that dictated women's roles in the greater, male dominated society that determined who could contribute to the cultural production of that society. They created the ground upon which future women artists could build. In addition, they also contributed to the redefinition of American culture after World War I by not only seeking out what George Stocking

identified as “genuine cultures,” tapping into their “primitive vitality” (290), but through their transcultural exchanges with their often racialized, marginalized subjects. They created visual and textual records of these subjects to shore against their “obliteration by the march of European civilization” (282).

For example, Willa Cather and Laura Gilpin are connected through their mutual attraction and regard for and connections with “genuine cultures” (as defined by Stockton) and to the primitive vitality of Southwestern Native Americans at a time when the nation sought to redefine American-ness by turning to these genuine cultures as a remedy toward “throw[ing] off the ‘worn out’ values of the ‘puritan tradition’, or the hypocrisy of small town Babbitry” (Stocking 286). Cather described such a connection with primitive vitality associated with a “genuine culture” in her letters to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (who later became a friend to Peterkin) while she was visiting the American Southwest in 1912. One of her Southwestern guides, a young Mexican named Julio, seemed to embody primitive vitality as she compared him to “Aztec sculpture” with skin as “bright yellow of very old gold and old races” though it’s not known if Julio was indigenous or mestizo (*Selected Letters* 159). Julio tells her a story about an Aztec queen that becomes the inspiration for her novella, “Coming, Aphrodite” appearing in 1920. His lively communication of this story greatly impressed Cather, particularly as “he’s never read anything but the prayer-book, so he has no stale ideas—not many ideas at all, indeed, but a good many fancies and feelings, and a grace of expression that simply catches you up. It’s like hearing a new language spoken” (*Selected Letters* 158). It is the energy of this new language that she hears spoken by the Bohemian inhabitants of the Nebraska prairies as well as spoken by the Southwestern desert and by the deserted

dwelling of ancient civilizations in the canyons of the Southwest. The vitality of this new language emerging from allegedly “genuine cultures” like those of the Southwestern Native Americans informs much of her work and contributes to the new way of seeing these “genuine cultures” as Cather creates them on the page. Her textual Southwestern landscapes also inspired Laura Gilpin, whose landscape photography included members of those cultures.

For Gilpin, her connection with a genuine Southwestern culture, specifically the Navaho, was personal, generating a transcultural exchange that lasted for decades. Their culture became the inspiration for many of her photos. Indeed, Gilpin would eventually collect all her images of them, including some of their stories, into her book, *The Enduring Navaho*, that appeared in 1968. However, many of the images therein date back to the beginning of her career as a photographer when she was introduced to them through her companion, Elizabeth Forster. Gilpin relates her deep respect for the Navaho in *The Enduring Navaho* when she says, “The Navaho have retained their culture through centuries without the use of written language, without centers of education, and without a religious head, for there is no such office—it simply exists in every person, in every family, in every part of their land” (3). Later she describes them as having the qualities of “dignity and happiness” (20) which springs from “their vital traditional faith, faith in nature, faith in themselves as part of nature...moulded and strengthened by the land in which they live” (20). This kind of reverence permeates Gilpin’s images of these people and of the land.

Peterkin and Ulmann express a similar kind of reverence for the Gullah, although their relationships with their subjects were complicated by both race and class

differences. Peterkin describes their vitality in her essay, “Seeing Things” in terms of their ability to meet “what life sent them with courage and grace” (*Collected Short Stories* 65). These are the same individuals, with “vivid, colorful lives” (66) who taught her how to see, though she retained many blind spots. Further, Peterkin maintains that “black people have been glad to tell me what they know, to show me what they see” and the vitality that they shared with her became like Cather’s new language, an energy that is present in all her work. Indeed, for many of Peterkin’s readers, Peterkin’s inclusion of the Gullah dialect in her stories and novels literally presented those readers with a new language as well as a new way to see her subjects, even as her personal relationships with her subjects was fraught by race and class divisions in the Jim Crow South of which she and her plantation were a part.

On the other hand, Ulmann’s commitment to create empathetic “human documents” was also complicated by her lack of identification of her photographic subjects, which appears, as Gillespie suggests, “a denial of their specific personhood” (103) in not identifying them by name. Nevertheless, Gillespie goes on to assert that the specificity in Ulmann’s images works against that generalization because her images are “incredibly personalized and sensitive portrait studies of the figures, attempting to showcase each sitter’s personality and traits,” that differentiate one sitter from another. Ulmann’s reverence for the Gullah is apparent in her efforts to create a lasting visual record of their community, in order to, as Stocking asserts, stave against their erasure by “the march of European civilization” (282). The fact that “Ulmann largely...focused on rural, marginalized people from the American South” long “before the advent of the RA/FSA photographers” (Gillespie 24) began documenting that region, photographing

rural African Americans at a time when they were not considered suitable subjects, indicates she felt strongly about their inclusion in the redefinition of American-ness, and so she photographed them as subjects worth seeing.

Indeed, the women writers and photographers discussed here continue to influence contemporary women photographers and writers, perhaps not with respect to redefining American-ness, but they still speak to contemporary women writers and photographers who grapple with similar issues relating to women as artists, such as balancing one's artistic practice with motherhood or being taken seriously and valued for their contributions to cultural production in a society still dominated by white men in many areas. Their influence can be seen in the way that contemporary women writers and photographers continue to employ a gendered photographic aesthetic in their work, widening the web of connection while maintaining an ethics of seeing. In fact, they seem to have inspired a sub-genre of fiction by women writers whose narratives focus on the lives of women photographers, including one of the photographers discussed here, Tina Modotti. Thus, they continue to encourage new ways of seeing through image and text, proving that, as Berenice Abbott, a contemporary of Ulmann's, describes: "Seeing the unseen is not only a matter of machine and high speed flash; it is a matter of the imagination, of seeing what the human eye has been too lazy or too blind to see before" (*A Guide to Better Photography* 1, 2), whether the subject the human eye sees is captured on film or on paper.

As Herons and Williams have said, "New ways of seeing have had to be stubbornly pursued in order to readjust dominant gendered perceptions and those of race and class" (xii) and, even further, with regard to the meanings we read in photographic



images or in prose images for that matter, we must recognize that “cultural or ethnic difference requires to be explored in its complexity and heterogeneity if we are to avoid the subordinating simplicities of mere ‘otherness’” (xiii), which examining the exchange of gazes affords. Those adjustments continue to this day, particularly when reading Peterkin’s text in *Roll, Jordan, Roll* from within a photographic context that offers the possibility of a radically different interpretation of that text than existed previously. Still, in the end, in spite of the advances women writers and photographers have made since the early twentieth century and the acknowledgements they have received with regard to cultural production, contemporary women photographers and writers still confront some of the same issues, like gender bias, that the women in the previous chapters have faced.

As mentioned in the introduction, an article appearing in the September 2015 issue of *Photo District News* by Sarah Coleman that describes how contemporary women photographers feel that they are under-represented in the photography industry, and that they still depend on their networks of connection to help each other succeed. This sentiment is repeated two years later in another article appearing in September of 2017 by David Walker that states that several sectors of the photography industry are still “dominated by (mostly) white men” (34) including photojournalism, art photography, and the commercial photo business. He also maintains that continued gender bias in the photo industry makes it harder for women photographers’ work to gain exposure or to make the connections because though “it might not be an old boys’ network anymore...the photo industry is still pretty much a bro network: male photographers and editors, young and middle-aged, making connections at industry events over drinks,” which works more often for women as an opportunity where “a lot of female photographers get hit on” (35).

Therefore, as women photographers did before them (Käsebier, Gilpin, Ulmann) they are continuing to develop their own networks, such as Women Photograph, “an online database of female photographers” founded by Daniella Zalzman, developed to “make it easier for photo editors to find and hire up-and-coming photographers” while also establishing grant and mentorship programs “to connect female photographers with mentors, both female and male” (36). Clearly, that web of connections between contemporary women artists is still a necessity while gender (and color) bias persists, where white men still control cultural production in favor of other white men from positions of power as art buyers, editors, curators, and gallerists. Ultimately, Walker maintains, “When the status quo is the path of least resistance, change takes a lot of time,” particularly since “only in the last 20 years or so have women moved into positions of influence in the industry” (37). Women writers have been writing for much longer, yet contemporary women, too, face many of the same issues as did the women writers discussed here.

Novelist and critic, Francine Prose, wrote an article *Harper's Magazine* in 1998 that still rings true for many contemporary women writers. In “Scent of a Woman's Ink,” she poses questions about what role gender plays in fiction writing in the latter twentieth century. Some of the responses she found from male writers and critics did not sound much different from Nathaniel Hawthorn's “scribbling women” or even Frank Norris' assessment of women's writing being influenced by their chafing nerves and “a touch of hysteria.” For example, Prose includes criticism from male literature reviewers in the 1960s, like this one from Bernard Bergonzi, a book reviewer for *The New York Review of Books* in the 1960s. Bergonzi asserted that “Women novelists, we have learned to

assume, like to keep their focus narrow” (63), implying that narrow focus involves subjects within the domestic sphere, like motherhood and personal relationships, perhaps executed with sentimentality, a pejorative term often applied to women’s writing. On the other end of the spectrum, Prose also mentions Theodore Solotaroff, who reviewed Katherine Anne Porter’s novel, *Ship of Fools*, published in 1962. In his review, he refers to Porter’s “relentless cattiness” that he says is part of her “sensibility” (Solotaroff 119). As to Porter’s novel overall, he describes it as “an account of a voyage to Europe three decades ago that has been labored over for twenty years by a writer who, late in life, is venturing, hence revealing, little more than bitchiness and clever technique” (121). Prose points out that both “bitchiness” and “relentless cattiness” are “terms used, perhaps too rarely, to scold mean-spirited male writers” (63), and that “fiction by women is still being read differently, with the usual prejudices and preconceptions,” but ultimately, in the end, she asserts “it’s pointless to characterize, categorize, and value writing according to its author’s gender, or to claim that women writers fixate on everything that irritates gynophobes about our sex” (70). Nevertheless, those characterizations are still applied to women writers.

As recently as 2016, Andrew Piper and Richard Jean So published an article appearing on April 8 in *The New Republic* that produced data analysis that indicates “The number of female bylines is up, but new data analysis shows that women authors are still stereotyped in book reviews” (accessed online, np). Further, their data analysis asserts that even though prominent book reviewers like *The New York Times* has made an effort to review more works by women, the number of works reviewed by men still surpasses the number of books by women. They point out, too, that even though more books by

women have been reviewed than before, the “discourse around gender we find in the last five years in the *Times* has essentially reproduced the public/private split bequeathed to us from the nineteenth century: Women writers are still being defined by their ‘sentimental’ traits and a love of writing about ‘maternal’ issues,” terms used to diminish the importance of women’s cultural production in favor of works by men “who are most being defined by their attention to matters of science and the state.” Ultimately, they conclude that better “gender representation does not necessarily equal less gender discrimination” and that it’s the underlying ideas that play out in images and words that place women’s cultural production in a lesser position that must be adjusted, hence the ongoing need to develop new ways of seeing.

Two specific examples of how contemporary women artists continue to be influenced and inspired by the artists discussed here can be found in the work of photographer Sally Mann and poet Layli Long Soldier. Sally Mann, whose immediate



Fig. 64 *Mother and Child*, Gertrude, Käsebier, 1899, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mina Turner



Fig. 65 *Virginia At 4*, Sally Mann, *Immediate Family*

family became an early focus of her work collected in a book by the same name, *Immediate Family*, found inspiration in the work of Gertrude Käsebier because Käsebier's pictorial rendering of domestic subjects "expressed the deep sensuality of love that exists between parent and child" (Greenough and Kennel 35) while eschewing sentimentality, though Mann would push the boundaries of domestic imagery much further. Both of the images, Käsebier's and Mann's, depict domestic intimacy, but in Mann's image, the mother figure is behind the camera, demonstrating her independence as an artist, as well as her child's emerging independence. Like Käsebier, Mann also struggled with defining herself as both mother and artist, although Mann's images take the viewer much deeper into the intimacy of the domestic sphere than Käsebier. In addition, Mann's images are presented in a way that is raw and sometimes as painful as it is tender. It is the raw beauty of her work in *Immediate Family*, published in 1995, which generated intense controversy over the appropriateness of the images. Mann's eye is neither lazy nor blind. Her images continue to challenge the notion of what is worth seeing.

Before *Immediate Family*, before having the children she photographed for *Immediate Family*, Mann produced a collection of photographs published in 1983 called *Second Sight*. This work combined her photographic images with original poetry. In doing this, she demonstrated her own relationship with and the influences of the written word, drawing inspiration from poets like Theodore Roethke. However, there are other writers who have influenced her later work, specifically her photographs of landscapes.

As an artist born and raised in southwestern Virginia, Mann's depictions of Southern landscapes and historical sites drew inspiration from writers of the Southern

Renaissance, including the work of Katherine Anne Porter, whose later work was informed by southern and Texas landscapes. In that same vein, I would also draw a comparison with Peterkin, who, even if Mann was unaware of her, also grappled with “the burden of the Southern past” (Greenough 129), as did Mann. They both felt compelled to navigate the complexities of white Southerners’ relationship with the black “other,” though Mann addressed this more directly. Like Peterkin, Mann was raised by a black nanny, and like Ulmann’s images, Mann’s photographs of her Virginia Carter, “Gee-Gee,” are visually personal as well as poignant. In her memoir, Mann writes of the paradoxical relationship between white Southerners and the African American community, explaining that white people raised by black servants “insist that a reciprocal and equal form of love was exchanged between them. This reflects one side of the fundamental paradox of the South: that a white elite, determined to segregate the two races in public, based their stunningly intimate domestic arrangements on an erasure of that segregation in private” (243). Still, with Gee-Gee as her subject, she found a way to depict that intimacy in a portrait of an elderly Gee-Gee holding Mann’s sleeping young daughter, Virginia. Unlike Ulmann, Mann and her subject shared an intimate exchange that lasted for decades, and her image is included in Mann’s book, *Immediate Family*, that also includes stunning images of her children. On the other hand, Mann uses a similar ethereal light comparable to the light Ulmann’s images of *The Dreamer*, whose white robes seem to emit light against a black background. In her portrait of an elderly Gee-Gee and Mann’s young daughter, Virginia, an ethereal light illuminates the old woman and sleeping girl, positioned like a version of a grand-Madonna and child glowing from within the surrounding dark. While Mann’s photographic aesthetic focuses

on the “ordinary things every mother has seen” (Mann, *Immediate Family* np) in the domestic sphere, just as Käsebier did, both found a way to present their subjects in images where “we hope [those images] they tell truths...a complicated story [where] we try to take on the grand themes: anger, love, death, sensuality, and beauty. But we tell it all without fear and without shame” (Mann, *Immediate Family*).

If Käsebier was an inspiration for Sally Mann, Zitkála-Šá’s work provided the ground for Native American women writers like poet, Layli Long Soldier, to define themselves and to push back against persistence of white racist, sexist stereotypes of Native Americans. Long Soldier writes the introduction to a new edition of Zitkála-Šá’s *American Indian Stories*, which features one of Gertrude Käsebier’s portraits of Zitkála-Šá appearing on the front cover. In the introduction, Long Soldier explains, “As a Lakota and as a woman, I feel a personal connection and literary lineage to Zitkála-Šá” (vii). Putting Zitkála-Šá’s work into context she adds, “Entering Zitkála-Šá’s work is a piercing experience. She was born into, educated by, and lived through some of the most dramatic—one would say genocidal—changes for our people.” Clearly, for Long Soldier, Zitkála-Šá’s work is both personal and powerful, and her connection with Zitkála-Šá extends beyond the literary. They both “share a tribal kinship” although Long Soldier maintains that Zitkála-Šá’s work has something to offer to “the thoughtful reader of any heritage” because it is a “testament to the power of language, documentation, resistance, and maintaining a tenacious hold on cultural values,” values that Zitkála-Šá used to indict stereotypes of Native Americans perpetuated by white, European culture.

As both a Native American and as a woman, Long Soldier explains why some readers may read Zitkála-Šá’s work and feel like she is pandering to a white audience that

tended to sexualize and fetishize Native American women. At one point, Long Soldier points out Zitkála-Šá's language, referring to a member of her own race as an "American aborigine" (*American Indian Stories* 114) or referring to her people as "the native folk" (115), making it appear as if "she's teetering toward othering the Native perspective" (x) when in fact, Long Soldier believes that she's "inclined to think that she knew precisely what she was doing and the effect of each word" coupled with "a driving intent" not meant to appease white readers, but to "make a statement aimed directly at the forehead of colonialism" (xi). Long Soldier's own work reflects this kind of intent, aimed at those who continue to try to keep Native American women artists in the margins, imposing cultural stereotypes upon them rather than letting them define themselves.

Just as Zitkála-Šá collaborated with Gertrude Käsebier to create photographic portraits where she, Zitkála-Šá, defined herself by choosing how she was depicted, refusing to conform to visual racist stereotypes of Native American women, Long Soldier includes a poem in her collection, *Whereas*, that borrows a gendered photographic aesthetic just as Zitkála-Šá did in creating her portraits. In the section titled, "This Being the Concerns," Long Soldier includes a concrete poem that evokes the shape of a box (or the shape of a photograph) framed by text that appears to indict those who would box in or marginalize a Native American poet inside a confined space defined by racism or sexism. Though Long Soldier doesn't mention Käsebier's portraits of Zitkála-Šá, this poem's shape and content evoke the gendered photographic aesthetic Zitkála-Šá employed in her portraits to challenge the racist stereotypes imposed upon her by a white, European audience who tried to keep her boxed within those stereotypes, which Long Soldier accomplishes from within the rectilinear space reminiscent of a box or a



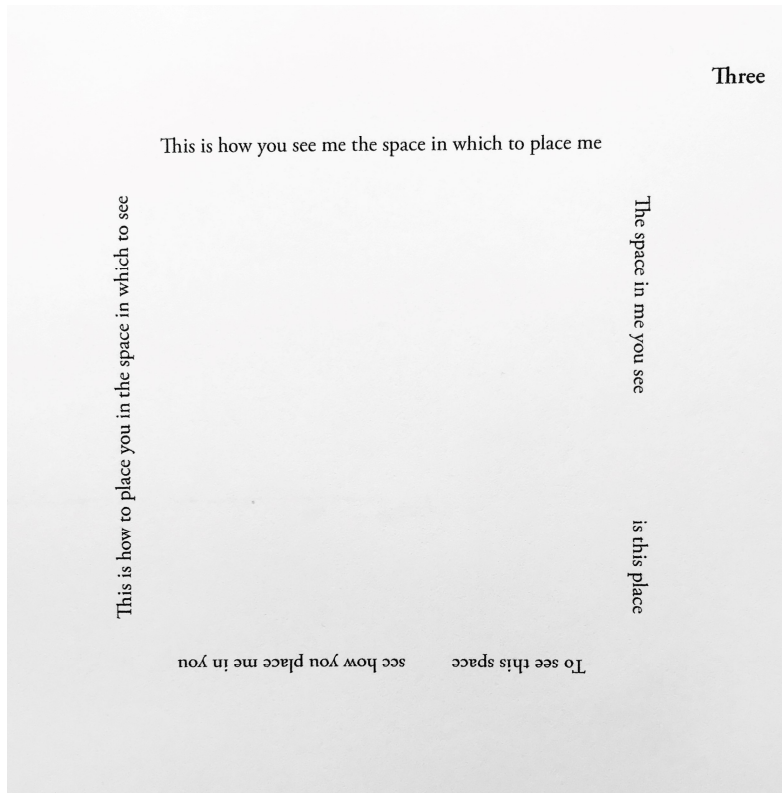


Fig. 66 “Three,” Layli Long Soldier, *Whereas*, p. 8

photograph. For Long Soldier, Zitkála-Šá has “set an example. And for us [Native Americans], she carved out her rightful space to say, ‘I drink in the myriad star shapes wrought in luxuriant color upon the green. Beautiful is the spiritual essence they embody’” (xii). Zitkála-Šá’s influence, her web of connections have clearly extended into the lives of contemporary Native American women artists, showing them how to reconnect with their cultural spiritual origins as well as showing them how to use the material of their own lives “to speak to the greater collective losses and strengths of [their] people” (xii). Those myriad star shapes against the green appear in Long Soldier’s poetry, as she uses the material in her own life to speak to the greater collective of Native American culture and to indict white, European culture for continued mistreatment of Native Americans. She thanks Zitkála-Šá directly in an untitled poem in *Whereas*,

including a paragraph from *American Indian Stories*, “Impressions of an Indian Childhood,” prefaced by her own line “though I’m told I come from a small world a lifted paragraph from one or other book” (16), and in the last line she declares “I thank Zitkála-Šá as I learn to other wise put—” (16).

Finally, in a blend of art forms, photography and fiction, the lives of several early twentieth-century American women photographers, contemporaries of Modotti and Ulmann, are informing the work of contemporary women writers, who harness the gendered photographic aesthetic these photographers employed to create fictional narratives featuring these photographers and their subjects. Beginning with the novel, *Tinisima*, by Mexican novelist Elena Poniatowska, appearing in 1992, Poniatowska presents a fictionalized account of the life of Tina Modotti that includes Modotti’s photographs. However, within the last decade, the influence of and interest in early twentieth-century women photographers seems to have produced a sub-genre in fiction. Multiple novels have appeared fictionalizing the lives of Berenice Abbott (*The Realist*), Dorothea Lange (*Mary Coin* and *Learning to See*), and Lee Miller (*The Age of Light* and *The Woman in the Photograph*), in addition to novels that create overlapping collage narratives of the lives of multiple women photographers (Whitney Otto’s *Eight Girls Taking Pictures* and Myla Goldberg’s *Feast Your Eyes*). This list doesn’t include novels that feature women protagonists who are also photographers, as in Lynne McFall’s *Dancer with Bruised Knees* (1994) and Anna Quindlen’s *Still Life With Bread Crumbs* (2014). Nor does it take into consideration the recent novels that have fictionalized the lives of male photographers like Edward Curtis, a contemporary of Käsebier—Marianne Wiggins, *The Shadow Catcher: A Novel* (2007). This is, by no means, an exhaustive list,

but it points directly to the continued influence and connection between women photographers and women writers.

In both Otto's and Goldberg's novels, real women photographers are the inspiration for the protagonists who are depicted in ways that illustrate the issues the real photographers faced as women, as mothers, and as pioneers pushing the gender norms to define themselves as artists. As such, both authors apply a gendered, photographic aesthetic in the way they present their narratives using fictional or real photographs while portraying the interconnectedness between women artists. However, their relationship with marginalized, non-white subjects that's present in the works of the artists and writers discussed previously, is not as important except in how these artists are themselves portrayed as marginalized subjects, as artists still working in the margins of mainstream society's cultural production. Otto's *Eight Girls Taking Pictures*, published in 2012, is formatted using loosely connected chapters, each chapter featuring a textual, fictional portrait of a different woman photographer. On the title page for each chapter, Otto presents an actual photographic image produced by the real photographer upon whom the fictional vignette is based. One of these vignettes is based on the life of Tina Modotti. Goldberg's *Feast Your Eyes* is formatted in a way to evoke the form of an exhibition catalog and features one female photographer protagonist, Lillian Preston, who is a composite character who based on the lives of photographers, Berenice Abbott (Ulmann's contemporary), Diane Arbus, and Sally Mann. Unlike Otto, Goldberg does not include any real photographs, only descriptions of 118 photographs, some of which are descriptions of actual photographs produced by a real photographer, like Diane Arbus, who inspired Goldberg.

Of these two novels, Otto's *Eight Girls Taking Pictures* begins with photographers who were contemporaries of the photographers discussed here, Imogen Cunningham and Lee Miller, among others, including a chapter based on the life of Tina Modotti. Each chapter (except for the last chapter) is preceded by an image on the title page introducing that chapter, an image created by the real photographer who inspired the fictional vignette. Otto includes one of Modotti's photographs on the title page of the chapter, "The Sentimental Problem of Clara Argento Or Mella's Typewriter." Clara Argento is Otto's fictionalized version of Modotti. Like Poniatowska's novel about Modotti's life, both Poniatowska and Otto begin her narrative after the assignation of Modotti's lover, a Cuban activist, Julio Antonio Mella. Modotti's photograph of Mella's typewriter is a somewhat abstract image of the typewriter the real Mella used when both he and Modotti were working on behalf of a radical Mexican activist organization fighting for workers' rights, contributing to *El Machete*, the socialist newspaper the organization produced. The chapter ends with Argento being deported from Mexico, leaving her camera behind, similar to Modotti's fate.

While Modotti's life offers the kind of drama that lends itself to fiction, Otto also touches on the photographic aesthetic that Modotti expressed, in wanting to create a new way of seeing through "honest photographs" that eschew "look[ing] myopically at the twentieth century with eighteenth century eyes" (quoted in *Illuminations* 260, 261). Otto's Clara Argento articulates something similar when she ruminates on the history of seeing or the gaze: "In the animal kingdom it is considered aggressive to stare. In the human gaze there is aggression but there is also sexual invitation (women, however, are encouraged to avert their eyes). But the photographer is expected to stare, to study, to

gaze upon her subject” (Otto 104). Modotti’s/Argento’s act of gazing through her camera actively subverted the gender norms that allowed men to be the gazers (like Edward Weston) and expected women to avert their eyes.

While Modotti didn’t struggle with the issues involving how to be both a mother and an artist, but she did, as mentioned previously, struggle with balancing her life as an artist and as an activist, even while she took photographs of mothers and the workers on whose behalf she became an activist. All of the characters in Otto’s novel, like the photographers discussed here, grapple with defining themselves as artists. Some struggle, in varying degrees, with being both artists and mothers, as did the real photographers who provided the inspiration for the protagonists in the chapters loosely based on the lives of Imogen Cunningham (chapter 1) and Sally Mann (chapter 8). They are the chapters that frame the novel and they serve to emphasize how the women photographers in the beginning of the twentieth century still influence and inspire contemporary women photographers, as well as women writers. In the chapter on Imogen Cunningham, Otto mentions Käsebier specifically as someone whose pictorial style influenced the Imogen character, Cymbeline Kelly, encapsulating Cymbeline’s conflict between being a mother and an artist by saying that Cymbeline would eventually “write that with ‘one hand in the dishpan, the other in the darkroom,’ she began to photograph the things around her” (40), changing the way that women photographers would portray and define domesticity, a subject considered unimportant by many male photographers. In the last chapter, when Jenny, the Sally Mann character, was severely criticized for her candid portrayal of her children’s lives (as Sally Mann did), a friend quotes Cymbeline Kelly to her: “Cymbeline Kelly used to say that men ban women from the battlefield, then tell them that the only

important pictures are taken on the battlefield. She said that women were kept at home because men needed them at home, yet when they make art reflecting, or inspired by, the only life they were allowed, the result is dismissed as trifling” (332). Clearly, Otto understood and was compelled by the fact that the questions around how to be both mother and artist continue to be relevant to both women photographers and women writers. As for how the women photographers’ lives and work have influenced her, she explains that in the author’s note in her book, stating, “the work of these particular women happens to coincide with how I see the world” (335). Finally, though she admits she never aspired to be a photographer herself, she characterizes her novel about these women photographers in this way: “The novel is my love letter, my mash note, my Valentine to these women photographers, whom I have loved for most of my adult life” (336).

Myla Goldberg was similarly inspired by many photographers and writers, including some she credits in her acknowledgments: Berenice Abbott, Diane Arbus, and Sally Mann, among others. That inspiration is not only present in her novel, *Feast Your Eyes*, published in 2019, the author photograph of Goldberg is a self-portrait, taken by herself in a mirror, showing her holding a camera. In an interview on National Public Radio, “Real Photos Inspire A Fictional Life in ‘Feast Your Eyes’” with Ari Shapiro, Goldberg was asked about the idea behind the book, which she said began with a question, “How do you be both an artist and a parent?” As a successful writer with two daughters, Goldberg may have been looking for her own answers to that question, particularly in the way she presents her photographer protagonist, Lillian Preston, a single mother struggling with, as Otto’s Cymbeline Kelly described, having one hand in a

dishpan and the other in the darkroom. For Preston, the darkroom took precedence, often to the detriment of her daughter's care and well-being, which contribute to her daughter's eventual ostracism from her mother. The novel itself takes the form of an exhibition catalog accompanying a posthumous exhibit of Preston's photographs, and this catalog includes a series of Preston's diary entries, letters, and descriptions of and notes about the photographs written by Preston's daughter.

Interestingly, most of the photographs described in Goldberg's novel are real photographs by photographers whose work has inspired Goldberg. Rather than physically placing them in her narrative, she has Preston's daughter describe them in great detail as part of the exhibition catalog. In Goldberg's interview, she's asked about a particular photograph in the novel, No. 78, and Goldberg admits it is a real photograph by Diane Arbus. It's an image of a young couple on the streets of New York that Goldberg felt particularly compelling, so she assigned it to Preston's fictional body of work. In this way, like Peterkin, she is borrowing the photographic aesthetic of Arbus, whose work was dedicated to, like Doris Ulmann, creating human documents. Also like Peterkin, Goldberg's engagement with Lillian Preston's fictional photographs allow her to comment on a controversial choice faced by many women in the 1950s and 1960s, who had to choose between having a successful career or having a family. The former choice often involved having an illegal abortion in an era before Roe V. Wade. The image that illustrates this is at the heart of the novel and depicts Preston, the photographer, lying on a bed, bleeding after an illegal abortion with her young daughter standing by her trying to comfort her mother. The title of this particular image is "Mommy Is Sick," and Goldberg admits this particular image came from her own imagination, although the image itself,

along with the fictional photos she calls the “Samantha Series” containing some nude photos of her young daughter, evoke the images of Sally Mann’s children in her collection, *Immediate Family*. Unlike Mann, the fictional Lillian Preston was arrested when these images, along with others, were displayed in a gallery. Although Mann faced severe criticism over the images of her children, she was never arrested for pandering obscenity, as Preston was. When, in the story, one of the arresting officers asks Preston what she was doing by taking nude pictures of her daughter, she responds, “I was making windows” (*Feast Your Eyes* 159).

The idea of photographs as windows was brought up in Goldberg’s interview when she was asked if that described how she felt about writing. She replied, “I think all art, any piece of art is a window into something else. And that’s why it is central to the human experience...it’s how we grow empathy in this world, which is what our world needs more than ever. And so, yea, those windows are essential.” In order to better understand photographic windows, Goldberg says she did research for the novel by living with street photographers for five or six years in addition to reading about photographers, having “five or six books of street photography on my desk at any given time,” immersing herself in the subject matter on which she was writing, being driven by the “magic [of] what a photo can do.”

The real magic, however, lies in the web of connections and influences between these writers and photographers discussed here, which provided the space to apply a gendered photographic aesthetic that allowed a new way of seeing in their differing application of a gendered photographic aesthetic. These are the artists who formed the ground upon which contemporary women artists continue to build, maintaining



influences and connections over generations and across art forms (photography and writing). As Griselda Pollock says, with regard to the importance of the work of women artists, “Aesthetic practices shift meaning, undo fixities and can make a difference” (*Differencing the Canon* 33). In spite of the challenges the women photographers and writers discussed here faced in the beginning of the twentieth century, the new ways of seeing they developed from within their webs of connection provided the means to define themselves as artists and to push back against a white, male-dominated society in which the cultural production of white men is valued above all others. In fact, some of the artists discussed here remain understudied with regard to their contribution to cultural production. These women artists and writers, working in tandem with each other or collaborating directly with one another, broadened, irrevocably, the notion of what is worth seeing, and for contemporary women artists and writers, they made a difference.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The term “the new woman” is purported to have emerged in 1894 from a conversation between British writers Sarah Grand and Ouida (see endnote 4), and refers to the moment when women began to break away from established gender norms. This meant women were moving out of the private sphere of home and family and into the public sphere. These “new women” began taking advantage of opportunities for higher education, for entering the workforce, and for pursuing professions in areas like photography. As scholar Martha Patterson has stated, “The rise of the American New Woman represents one of the most significant cultural shifts of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (1), and included women in roles as diverse as political activists, progressive reformers, and artists, like the writers and photographers discussed here. For example, “Käsebier was of the generation that spearheaded the movement for women’s suffrage in the 1880s and 1890s. Although Käsebier was never a suffragist, she was a product of the feminine culture that made the push for women’s equality conceivable” (Pyne 17).

<sup>2</sup> Pictorialism began in the 1880s as an aesthetic movement in photography “which aimed to produce images as artful as paintings” as opposed to images that were merely a visual record of objects (Rosenblum 94), like those produced by snapshots, thereby establishing photography as a legitimate art form. The approach to creating artful images often involved employing a soft focus and producing soft tones, with a particular attention to the use of light with regard to the subject. Part of the Pictorialist process included the use of props or elaborate backgrounds and encouraged manipulation of the image to further enhance its painterly qualities, like hand tinting images, which established the photographer as an artist as opposed to a mechanic/amateur taking snapshots to record whatever is in front the camera. In the United States, Alfred Steiglitz began as a Pictorialist who created the Photo-Session movement in photography in 1902, which championed the effort to promote photography as an art form. Other Pictorialist photographers at that time include Gertrude Käsebier, Alvin Langdon Coburn, F. Holland Day, Edward Steichen, Clarence White, and Alice Boughton.

<sup>3</sup> Motherhood as performativity is a form of gender performativity defined by critic Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Butler explains that gender is not defined solely by one’s sex, but it is also a series of actions performed by individuals, actions that are dictated by societal expectations of how a woman or a man should behave. In Käsebier’s case, women were expected to perform the actions associated with the domestic sphere, which included mothering children. However, as Käsebier herself explained, motherhood did not define her entirely. She performed the actions required of the female gender in nineteenth-century American culture with regard to mothering, raising her children with love and devotion, but she also defined herself as an artist, an action not compliant with societal expectations for the behavior of women.

<sup>4</sup> According to Natalie Schroeder, who wrote the introduction to the Valancourt Classic edition of Ouida's best-selling novel *Under Two Flags*, Ouida was the pen name for Marie Louise Ramé, who was "a [British] nineteenth-century literary phenomenon. During a career spanning almost forty years, she wrote twenty-four novels and two volumes of essays, as well as short stories and numerous articles on animal rights, politics, women's suffrage, and the arts" (vii).

<sup>5</sup> *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, by Walter Benjamin, is a collection of Benjamin's essays on art and culture. His "A Little History of Photography" criticizes the medium of photography because this new way of seeing, its ability to reproduce copies of an image divests [the image] it of its uniqueness, its aura "to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness—by means of its reproduction" (266). He is particularly critical of the commercialization of portrait photography, turning miniature portrait painters into photographers. This produced a downward spiral when businessmen invaded professional photography from every side; and when, later on, the retouched negative, which was the bad painter's revenge on photography, became ubiquitous, a sharp decline in taste set in. This was the time photograph albums came into vogue" (281). However, Antonia's daughter's retouched portrait and her family album invest, rather than divest, the uniqueness of her life apart from the "copy-like" rendition of her life as told by the narrator.

<sup>6</sup> Frederic Remington, October 4, 1861-December 26, 1909, was a painter and sculptor specializing in creating images of the Old West that often included cowboys, Indians, and the U.S. Cavalry as his subjects.

<sup>7</sup> Indigenismo, specifically in Mexico, is a term that references the notion that indigenous cultures are important in the formation of national identity, in this case the national identity of post-revolution Mexico. Stocking asserts, "Objects of ambivalent regard over the centuries, they [indigenous cultures] were then entering a phase of rediscovery, in the eyes of both Mexican *indigenistas* seeking a more viable basis for national identity, and United States intellectuals yearning for a more 'genuine culture'" (310). Indigenismo was particularly embraced by the arts, with various artists and writers tapping into indigenous, primal vitality to invigorate cultural production. As a result, indigenous images appeared in the work of artists like Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Tina Modotti, as well as in the early work of writer, Katherine Anne Porter.

<sup>8</sup> According to historian Elizabeth Salas, "The *soldaderas* were unofficially recognized as a necessary part of the Mexican army" during the revolution, and some of the services they performed were indeed domestic, like cooking, nursing, carrying supplies, but they did join in the fighting at times, but "[d]espite these key services...military rhetoric and practice marginalized the *soldaderas* by placing them at the bottom of the military pecking order." Even though the soldadera system "ceased to exist by the 1930s, the cultural legacy of these women has never dissipated" (121), as evidenced by the song about "La Adelita" that Porter participates in singing in "Xochimilco." Salas also asserts

that the presence of the soldaderas was meant to “stem the tide of desertions” among the men in the military, which, whether Porter intended it or not, lends some irony to “María Concepción” as María Rosa not only deserts the army with Juan, she is the cause of Juan deserting María Concepción.

<sup>9</sup> The Farm Security Administration was a New Deal, agricultural agency formed in 1937 by Franklin Roosevelt. It was established to provide rehabilitation in the form of job training and education for poor farmers hit hard by the Great Depression. As part of the program, photographers, like Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and others, were commissioned to document the lives and cultures of impoverished rural areas in the Deep South and elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> The Gullahs are a group of African-Americans who were brought to the South as slaves to work on the plantations like Lang Syne, upon which the Peterkins lived for generations. As described by Michelle Lamunière, they were not originally a homogeneous group, but “the name Gullah came to refer to the community of people who share similarities of lifestyle and worship based on this unique blending of cultures [African and Christian American]. One major factor which contributes to the self-respect and dignity of the Gullah people evident in Ulmann’s photographs is the importance of religion and sense of community in which each individual is an integral part sharing in the responsibility of the whole” (295). They were initially believed to speak their own language, but linguists have determined that their language is actually a form of English heavily influenced by their original African language.

<sup>11</sup> The Southern Renaissance was a movement to reinvigorate literary culture in the American South in the 1920s and 1930s, which, in addition to Julia Peterkin, included writers like William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, and Katherine Anne Porter.

<sup>12</sup> There was some controversy about the article Zora Neale Hurston published about Cudjo Lewis in the October 1927 issue of *Journal of Negro History*, “Cudjo’s Own Story of the Last African Slaver.” According to biographer Valerie Boyd, for whatever reasons, Hurston “lifted whole pages from Roche’s study,” (153) *Historic Sketches of the Old South* and included them in her article without citing Roche, although this was never discovered during her lifetime. Diouf comments in her introduction to *Dreams of Africa in Alabama* that Hurston returned to Alabama and spent two months collecting more material from Cudjo Lewis, hoping to publish a book about him (3), but after sending it to publishers in 1931, “it never found a taker” until 2018. Amistad, an imprint of Harper Collins, published *Barracoon, The Story of the Last “Black Cargo.”* Hurston and Peterkin traveled in similar circles in literary Harlem and Hurston knew others were seeking out Lewis’s story. She even tried to coax Lewis to not tell his story to others, particularly since she planned on publishing a book about him. Did she read Peterkin’s *Bright Skin* and see Lewis’s story recreated through the character Big Pa? One can only wonder if she felt any resentment over Peterkin’s *Bright Skin* (in which she included a small vignette of Lewis’s story), which appeared in 1932.