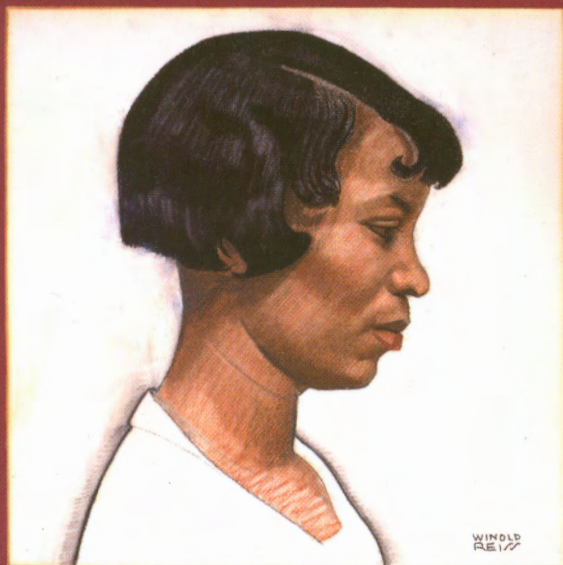


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The Visual Harlem Renaissance; or, Winold Reiss in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The German American artist Winold Reiss (1886-1953) first collaborated with the African American philosopher and writer Alain Locke on the *Survey Graphic* special edition *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro* (March 1925). Afterwards, he provided the complex visual illustrations (including portraits, 'fantasies,' lettering, and graphic design) for the quintessential anthology of what came to be known the Harlem Renaissance: *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925). In the following article, I argue that Reiss arrived at a new understanding of African American culture and developed a remarkable appreciation regarding the complexity of non-European traditions via a detour. After entering the United States, Reiss quickly became disillusioned with life in American metropolitan cities. The reasons were manifold. The vision of a democratic union of people from all corners of the world proved to be merely a chimera. Ethnic ghettos, intolerance, racial disrespect, chauvinism, and a general sense of cultural hierarchies ran counter to his expectations of equality American style. After World War I, Reiss's frustrations with American culture reached a low point. In this context it is interesting to ask why, of all people, Alain Locke asked the German immigrant to provide the visual narrative of the New Negro Movement. The answer can be found in an unpublished diary, which Winold Reiss wrote in Mexico. After a creative and personal crisis in New York, the three-month trip to Mexico from October 5 to December 10, 1920, became an epiphany for Reiss. The discovery of the "Mexico Diary" helps us to better understand the function of Mexican art, folklore, religiosity, and the history of *mestizaje* in the context of the stylizations of what James Weldon Johnson called 'Black Manhattan.'²

I.

The German American artist Winold Reiss (1886-1953) is mostly known for his innovative contributions to the quintessential founding document of the so-called Harlem Renaissance: the anthology of African American short stories and poems called *The New Negro: An Interpretation* edited by Alain Locke in 1925. Apart from his complex design work for books, magazines, and mural art work, his portraits of African American writers, artists, and intellectuals such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, or W. E. B. Du Bois remain the most visible reminders of Reiss's deep appreciation for the cause of racial pride,

¹ All quotations from Winold Reiss are taken from the "Mexico Diary," 1920. Winold Reiss Papers, Reiss Archives. Excerpts published with permission from Renate Reiss (Winold Reiss Estate).

² I would like to thank the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and the TERRA Foundation for enabling me to conduct archival research on Winold Reiss.

racial uplift, and recognition of African American culture. The 2009 exhibition regarding the century of jazz from a European perspective called *Le Siècle du Jazz* featured Reiss's artwork on the Harlem Renaissance prominently as a prototypical visual entry into the modernist stylizations of black culture, as the cover of the comprehensive catalogue suggests. Reiss stands at the beginning of a new approach to visualize the vitality of African American culture. Why, of all people, did Alain Locke choose a German immigrant to provide the visual narrative of the New Negro Movement? The answer, I argue, can be found in a diary which Winold Reiss wrote in Mexico.³ After a creative and personal crisis in New York, the three-month-long trip to Mexico from October 5 to December 10, 1920 became an epiphany for Reiss.

The discovery of the "Mexico Diary" helps us to better understand the function of Mexican art, folklore, religiosity, and the history of *mestizaje* in the context of the stylizations of what James Weldon Johnson called 'Black Manhattan.' Reiss shares cosmopolitan notions which the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos put forth in *La Raza Cósmica (The Cosmic Race)* and would soon collaborate with Miguel Covarrubias on visualizing Harlem. The account is written in German combining three stylistic forms: First, the text consists of matter-of-fact travel information regarding Mexican places, spaces, and people. Second, the diary offers meditations on the function of color in Mexican landscapes. These passages also identify people and locations which Reiss portrayed and painted. Third, the text offers critical observations on borders and philosophical reflections on issues of gender constructions, racial conflicts, and the function of art in metropolitan cities. There are two manuscript versions: the first version Reiss produced during his trip; the second version represents a careful transfer with slight editorial changes. While the first manuscript does not feature a cover page, the second features a title: "Meine Reise durch Mexico." It seems likely that Reiss intended to publish the account. However, the transfer remains incomplete. After his return from Mexico to New York, Reiss found himself bursting with creativity and in high demand with commissions in the fields of portraiture, graphic design, interior design, lettering, and advertising. This must have kept him from revisiting his literary endeavors. Crossing the Rio Grande into Mexico, his insights regarding cultural clashes, the persuasive power of Latin American folklore and traditions, as well as his efforts to rethink his role as an artist in the United States make the Mexican diary of Winold Reiss a precious resource to understand why a German artist who emigrated to the United States in 1913 became so involved in the project of the Harlem Renaissance and the visual iconography of 'Harlem.'⁴

³ Frank Mehring is currently in the process of editing a critical edition of the unpublished diary in German with an English translation and the visual artwork Winold Reiss produced during his trip to Mexico. The transcription offered in this article remains true to the spirit of immediacy in which the diary was produced. Only the punctuation has been carefully adapted to modern standards in those cases where it helps the reading process. All quotations from Winold Reiss, "Mexico Diary." 1920. Winold Reiss Papers, Reiss Archives.

⁴ In his "Notes to the Illustrations" in *The New Negro*, Alain Locke praises Reiss for having "painstakingly collaborated" with him on the book project. Locke locates his contributions at the beginning of a new era in which African and African American culture will be presented in

II.

"Vorwärts ins gelobte Land. Ich hoffe alles" (MS).⁵ This is how Reiss opens his diary hoping to document a process of personal and artistic renewal. This "promised land" was not so much the United States but Mexico. "Ich verlasse Amerika ohne Sentimentalität und sollte doch ein bisschen traurig sein" (MS). The immigrant, who had arrived in 1913 in New York, had established a school for arts and crafts in downtown Manhattan, started a revolutionary art magazine *The Modern Art Collector*, and had received several prestigious assignments for commercial advertisement. Nevertheless, he had become disenchanted, not only with the American art scene but also the way of life in a metropolitan city and the discrepancy between his Germanized notion of American democratic life and his experience of xenophobia during World War I in New York. In addition, he struggled with a marital crisis. The trip to Mexico functioned as a catharsis and promised spiritual renewing. It led him from Mexico City to various locations such as Xochimilco, Guadalupe, Chapultepec, Puebla, Oaxaca, and Tepoztlán.

Reiss was among the earliest artists who traveled from the United States into Mexico after the Revolution and initiated an intense process of cultural exchange. His visual artwork inspired an American fascination with the colors of the Mexican earth, its volcanoes, the ruins of the Pre-Columbian pyramids, and the religious piety of the people. On Tuesday, Oct. 5, 1920, he expresses his disenchantment with America and relocates the proverbial 'promised land' across the Rio Grande in Mexico.

Ich schaue ins flache Land in die sich ganz gleich bleibende Natur und suche jetzt schon breite Hüte und dunkle Augen. Dabei nähern wir uns dem Mississippi— der Zug rast wie blödsinnig, und meine Gedanken, die doch vorwärts gehen sollten, eilen ganz oft zurück zu dem elenden Künstlergesindel, das sich abends durch die Metropole wälzt. Noch 2 Stunden bis St. Louis. (MS)

The accelerated process of urbanization with its effects of industrialization, its quiet desperation in the Thoreauvian sense, and mass production which characterized the Progressive Era becomes the focal point of a process which Reiss identifies as alienation and uprootedness. In his diary, the expectation of arriving in a country characterized by pre-industrial purity is counterbalanced with the negative impression of the alleged progress of U.S.-American civilization. At the same time, the entry shows how travel reports and films have contributed to an imagination of the 'South' which Reiss would translate and later popularize in his visual approach to primitivist culture and folklore.

St. Louis ist eine, vom Bahnhof und dessen Umgebung beurteilt, unmöglich dreckige Stadt. Eine Fusswanderung, wie wir sie während unseres 1½stündigen Aufenthalts unternommen, kann aus Melancholie zum Selbstmord führen. Alles russig und keine Schönheit. Die Menschen mit geekelten Gesichtern hungern an erleuchteten Läden he-

a new, innovative way. "What Gauguin and his followers have done for the Far East, and the work of Ufer and Blumenschein and the Taos school for the Pueblo and Indian seems about to be done for the Negro and Africa" (419).

⁵ All quotations refer to the first manuscript version of the diary. There are no page numbers.

rum wie Schmetterlinge, die bei Nacht in die Lampe fliegen. Kein Lachen—alles Verzerrung, das wahre, echte Bild einer Industriestadt, deren Reichtum auf Kosten dieser kaum noch Menschen gleichenden Wesen gebaut ist. Wenn die mal erwachen und empfinden, was wahres Leben ist, dann ist alles vorüber, die werden keinen Stein auf dem andern lassen und alles zusammenhauen. Ich verstehe es. Ein Bedauern empfinde ich für diese Menschen, die keine Schönheit kennen und ihrer Seele Nahrung aus billigen Moviehäusern holen. (MS)

The juxtaposition between 'America' and 'Mexico' in very general terms continues throughout the diary. One example early on shows the frustration with which Reiss left the United States to search for a less materialistic, more wholesome and spiritually sensitive people. The nostalgic preconception and a tendency to romanticize the encounter with the Mexican landscape and the people are clearly noticeable.

Der Abend fand uns in Mexico City. Bald zu Bett und am Montag dem 11. Oktober ins amerikanische Consulat. Der Empfang kühl—dumme Fragen und neue Passportbilder. Am Nachmittag Guadalupe und ein unvergessliches Erlebnis. Echtestes Mexico. Wieder Farben und Indianer. Vorbereitungen für eine grosse Kirchenfeier. Aufschlagen von Karussellen. Verkäufer, Geschrei und Gewoge wie ich es nie gesehn. Typen überall zum Schreien schön. Ich hilflos in all der Umgebung nicht wissend, was zu beginnen. Spät am Nachmittag hatte ich mich dann endlich für ein Motiv entschlossen: ein Aufgang zum Kirchhof mit farbigen Häusern. Alles Volk drängte um mich, die Glocken läuteten, Indianermusik in der Ferne—ein unendlich Glücksgefühl und ein Vergessen amerikanischer Jahre—ein absolutes Vergessen. (MS)

On his walk from La Venta to the ex-monastery of Desierto de los Leones on October 14, Reiss came face to face with Mexican revolutionaries. In a striking conflation of memories of the Black Forest and the encounter with Mexican revolutionaries, Reiss began sketching a series of soldier drawings: "Ich konnte mich des Eindrucks nicht erwehren, dass ich im Schwarzwald bin. Ein stimmungsvolles Verzehren von Broten und Orangen unter Gesellschaft zweier Soldaten, die im Walde auf Wache waren. Ich habe die beiden Kerle auch gezeichnet" (MS). In the following days, he produced emotionally powerful portraits such as *Brothers-in-Arms at Zapata's Headquarters in Cuernavaca, Mexico* or *Aztec Indian from Tepoztlán,⁶ Mexico*, which had been reproduced widely in newspapers, magazines, and travel books. The drawing of Zapatista soldiers is today recognized as "one of the earliest treatments, by an artist of any nationality, of the Mexican Revolution" (Oles 70). Reiss arrived in Cuernavaca on October 19, where about 3,000 soldiers resided. Overwhelmed by the sight of the ferocious looking fighters and the vitality of the city, he felt a rush of creativity:

Es ist ein eigenartig buntes Bild, am Abend diese Gestalten auf der Plaza promenieren zu sehen. Die Musik spielt. Das ganze Volk lebt und freut sich in diesem Tönen und vergisst die Leiden, die das tägliche Leben bringen. Auch der Zapatistengeneral war da. Ein junger, dekadent aussehender Kerl ohne Kinn, aber einer umso grösseren Pistole, Mischling natürlich wie alle Führer, die Indianer selbst sind, wie man ihrem Wesen sieht, friedliche Leute. Ich habe eine ganze Menge Zapatistas gezeichnet und bin beinahe zum General geschlagen worden. Auch einen Capitan habe ich verewigt. (MS)

⁶ In his manuscript, Reiss spells the name of the ancient Mexican town with an extra 'o' and without an accent. In this article, I use today's official spelling, however.

The preceding entry is a strikingly philosophical reflection on the pettiness of national hatred, German imperialism, and the bloody history of the Mexican Revolution. Reiss concludes: "Wenn wir der Liebe keine Altäre bauen jetzt, wo die Welt in Stücke geht, ist alles verloren, dann gehen wir den Weg, den viele von uns gegangen, hinunter ins Chaos, und eine andere, bessere Rasse als die Weisse wird steigen" (MS). Reiss's visual rendering of the Zapatista soldiers combines references to recent historic events of military conflicts in Mexico with aesthetic interests. He uses bright yellow, red, and blue colors to bring a striking contrast to the melancholy countenance of the armed soldiers. In consequence, they appear more like tender brothers rather than the ferocious bandits he mentions in the diary. Visually, Reiss emphasizes the suffering and humanity in the fighters' attitudes and expressions.

The portrait of the *Aztec Indian from Tepoztlán, Mexico* has been criticized as an example of a condescending attitude usually assumed by Americans when they talked about Mexican Indians. For example, James Oles identifies the unfinished parts of Reiss's drawing below the neck of the Aztec as a white costume which Americans call 'pyjamas.' According to Oles, this kind of clothes represents one of the "innumerable legal impositions forcing the Mexican Indian to abandon his ancient culture" (75). However, the diary entries about Reiss's four-day-long sojourn in Tepoztlán from Nov. 11 to 15 reveal a different context. Reiss engaged in conversations with an old captain (Señor Capitan Romero 'with Spanish *grandezza*') about Mexican history and asked 14 people to sit for him. Despite the extreme poverty the Aztec descendants lived in, he felt overwhelmed by the warm-hearted spirit which surrounded their personality. If one compares the drawing *Aztec Indian from Tepoztlán, Mexico* with Reiss's portraits of leading African American artists of the Harlem Renaissance, it becomes quite clear that Reiss was not so much interested in capturing a "white costume." Rather, the areas below the neck are intentionally unfinished and show the untreated canvas. Instead, Reiss pays particular attention to skin shades and facial expressions. This technique asks the viewer to concentrate on the person's individuality expressed in the facial features. The unfinishedness does not take away from the political dimension of the portraits. One might argue that the focus on skin colors and facial expressions in the portraits of Mexicans, Blackfeet Indians, German Americans, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, or African Americans challenges U.S.-American audiences to rethink issues of racial hatred, ethnic xenophobia, and to critically reassess the transnational dimension behind the motto *e pluribus unum*. The technique became a trademark in Reiss's portraits of African American artists as the example of Zora Neale Hurston shows.

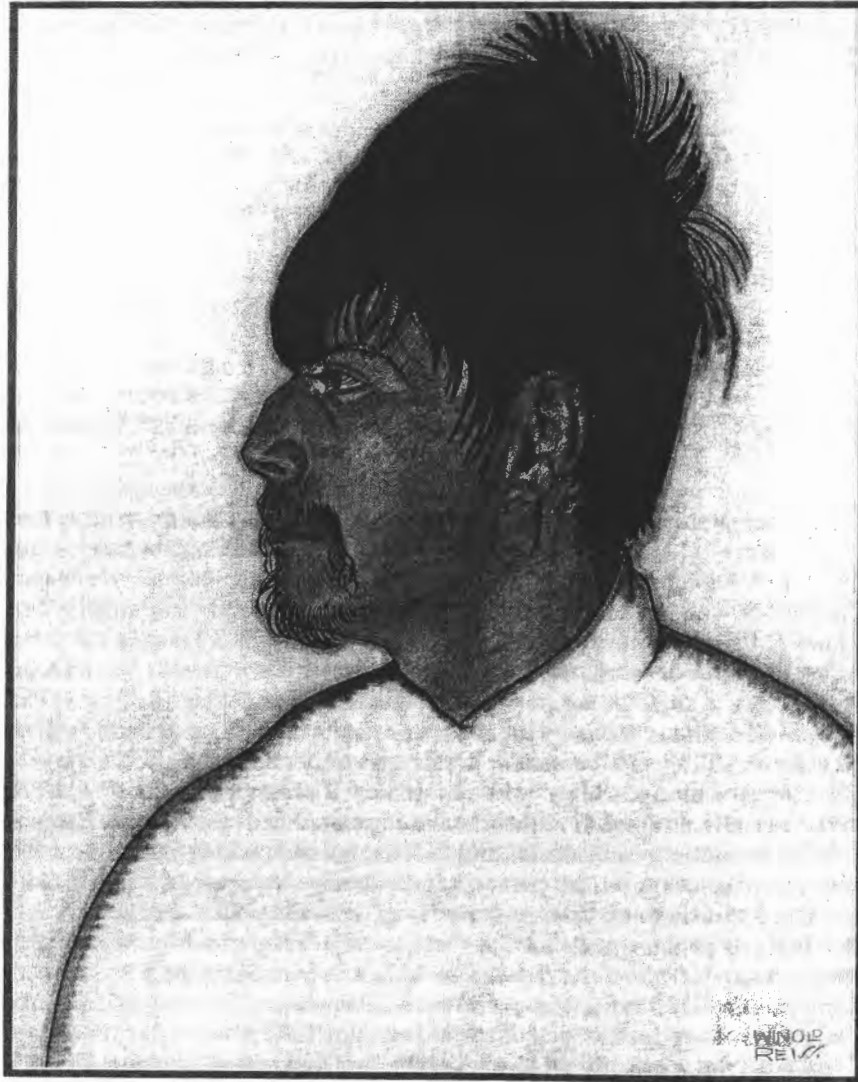


Fig. 1: Winold Reiss. *Aztec Indian from Tepoztlán, Mexico*. Color pencil and pastel on paper, 20" × 16". 1920. Private Collection. Image courtesy of Reiss Archives.



Fig. 2: Winold Reiss. *Miss Hurston* (Zora Neale Hurston). 1925. Pastel on Whatman board, 16½" × 16½". FISK UNIVERSITY GALLERIES, NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE. Image courtesy of Reiss Archives.

Many of the philosophical reflections find their equivalent in five paintings which Reiss calls "Mexican fantasies." The 'fantasies' represent imaginative explorations into the history of the Spanish conquest, rituals, and religious traditions. They indicate Reiss's growing interest in issues of cultural confrontations, guilt, shame, and cultural relativism. Reiss visualizes collisions of European imperialism and the Mexican struggle against oppression using color to fuse his artistic inspirations with a political trajectory. For example, in the fantasy of *Montezuma's Death*, the color white functions as a signifier for the instruments of war and death. Instead of religious associations with purity in the Western art history, purity of sentiments is now associated with the different colors Reiss encountered during his trip through Mexico. Another Mexican 'fantasy' with two nude figures features a rainbow color line at the very bottom. Reiss is less interested in archaeological accuracy but more in artistic forms, a trend which photographers Paul Strand, Edward Weston, and Laura Gilpin would emphasize in their work on Mexico a decade later when the tourist industry had discovered the potential of escapism the Mexican imagination triggered among big city dwellers. Reiss invites the viewer to cross the Rio Grande with him in order to trace back the beauty of the abstract color codes in the skin color of the figures, the orange in

trees, the yellow in the rays of the sun, and the green, brown, and blue in the Mexican landscape. In the upper left corner, for example, the rainbow scheme is repeated in a vignette, which opens up a window to Mayan rites with stylized figures facing towards the sun.

The fantasy with two nude figures seems to create a critical dialogue with the color code of *Montezuma's Death*. Here, whiteness as a non-color is associated with death and destruction. For Reiss, the Mexican experience undermined the heroic qualities of Wagnerian mythology surrounding figures such as Parsifal or Lohengrin. It reveals a hidden trajectory of brutality and national chauvinism. Reiss shows the white knight as a kind of killing machine stabbing naked, unarmed people to death. The lower part of this fantasy evokes a sense of modern-day efficiency and anonymity in the process of mass slaughter. However, above the large skull, which serves as a visual reference point for the genocide in the 15th century, looms a larger head with the firm profile and proud expression of a survivor. The all-seeing eye with its spiritual power shines on this representative of the Mexican race.⁷ The Mexican fantasies pinpoint directly to Reiss's graphic design elements and the image *African Fantasy: Awakening*, which he contributed to Locke's *The New Negro: An Interpretation*.

During this trip, Reiss had an epiphany. Standing in the midst of people from all over Mexico with his board and canvas in front of him, Reiss felt like he had finally come 'home.' The German term *Heimat* (homeland) does not so much represent a concrete location such as the Black Forest or Munich. Neither is there a patriotic sense of 'fatherland.' Instead, Reiss's term *Heimat* refers to the spiritual realm. It refers to the gratifying experience of being among people in rural areas who are very much in tune with their specific folk culture and environment. Before he left Mexico to return to the United States, Reiss conflated a German sense of *Heimat* and *Heimweh* [homesickness] with his Mexican experience: "noch einmal schimmerte das unbeschreibliche etwas Mexicos in meine Seele, sich darin vergrabend, verklammernd, um mich heimwehkrank zu machen, wenn ich wieder im Lande des Materialismuses bin" (MS). Encountering the rich colors of Mexican culture and the joyfulness of the people, Reiss adds a spiritual component to the notion of belonging which transcends territory and national borders. Compared to Mexico, the United States appeared to be 'terrifyingly dead and lifeless.' Thus, his trip to Mexico represents not so much an expatriation but a reconnection with something he had lost during his stay in New York City.⁸

⁷ Apart from the similarities to the utopian visions of José Vasconcelos, Reiss's Mexican artworks also echo Diego Rivera, who defined his aesthetic theories in his article "From a Mexican Painter's Notebooks." This article appeared in *Arts* in January 1925 as a translation by Katherine Anne Porter. Rivera praised the "Indian aesthetic" for its "profound and direct expression of a pure art in relation to the life which produced it." He emphasized that artists needed to convey and feel "the presence of the divine mysterious core hidden within the visible spectacle of the world" (qtd. in Walsh and Alvarez 104).

⁸ The statement is in line with the sentiment of another cultural mediator between Mexican art and American culture who had left her home in New York City's Greenwich Village and entered the space south of the Rio Grande at the same time: Katherine Anne Porter. She explained that "I went to Mexico because I was not going into exile, but I was going back to a place I knew

III.

During his trip to Mexico, Reiss met Katherine Anne Porter. On a personal note she explained: "Winold Reiss appeared one morning in Mexico City, quite out of nowhere, and invited me to walk to the cathedral of Tepoztlán with him that day." On their walk to Tepoztlán on December 5, 1920, they engaged in a lengthy conversation. Among the topics discussed were issues of gender, female emancipation, and socio-political situations of women in the United States and Mexico. Reiss was impressed by the kind of dedication to the domestic sphere which allowed indigenous women to "radiate out inexhaustible energy" (n. pag.). American women of metropolitan cities, however, seemed to have dull eyes and migraines; they exhibited signs of nervousness. Reiss's notion of manhood finds expression in various stylizations of men as heroic figures on whose shoulders rests the Herculean challenge to rid the world of injustice, inequality, and self-inflicted estrangement with his or her environment. The image of the Nietzschean superman standing at the threshold between nature and city with a woman clutching to his body is emblematic of Reiss's vision. The river separating the natural environment from the man-made structures of urbanity might well resemble the Rio Grande which Reiss crossed with a new sense of spiritual renewal he wanted to bring to the world of New York and Harlem in particular. Despite their likely discrepancies, Reiss and Porter shared a specific view on Mexican culture.⁹ As New York City dwellers, they both believed that their Mexican imaginary resembled a key to bring color (in a literal and abstract sense) to the American urban experience and provide clues for a new spiritual substance.¹⁰

and loved" (qtd. in Brinkmeyer 29). Similar to Reiss, she argued in a letter to the editor of *Century* "Why I Write about Mexico" that "New York is the most foreign place I know" (33). Yet both artists knew that their artistic calling could only come to fruition by working in the urban center where they could function as a bridge between the southern landscape and the cityscapes.

⁹ Shortly after their walking tour, Porter wrote several stories and sketches about Xochimilco including "In a Mexican Patio" for the *Magazine of Mexico* (April 1921), "Xochimilco" for the *Christian Science Monitor* (May 31, 1921) and "Children of Xochitl" (unpublished, ca. March 1921). She describes this town as an 'Island of the Blest' and the people as living in perfect harmony with a beautiful and benign nature. As Thomas F. Walsh has argued, "Xochimilco" expressed "her hope in Mexico as the promised land" (35).

¹⁰ Porter contacted Reiss when she was asked to edit a special issue on Mexico for the *Survey Graphic*. Porter was impressed by his artistic vision and ability to translate his feeling for the Mexican spaces to canvas as she explained in a note during her walking trip with him. "[Winold Reiss] showed me some rather remarkable sketches of Indians." Tom Walsh communicated this unpublished record in a letter to Reiss's son Tjark on June 22, 1986. The statement continues as follows: "[Winold Reiss] told an amazing story: he had tramped the states of Oaxaca, Jalisco, Puebla, and I think, Morelos, though I am not sure, alone, unarmed, carrying enough food to last only from one village to another." (Letter located in the Reiss Archives). Besides seven Rivera murals, ten examples of Mexican children's art, a portrait of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and Best Maugard's drawings, Winold Reiss's portraits of Indians and a painting of Cuernavaca hold a special place in the magazine. Porter's description of the colorful market places and the function of Mexican folk ballads in her essay "Corridos" offer a striking pendant to Reiss's visual narrative. Among the contributors in the special edition was also Vasconcelos. His book *La Raza Cósmica (The Cosmic Race)* from 1925 foreshadows a

Reiss's use of bold colors in poster art and portraiture was designed to counterbalance artistic tendencies of German as well as American traditions upheld by the impressionist artists who became known as The Ten or the Ash Can School. In the course of the 1920s, Reiss more and more identified himself as an American who envisioned himself at the beginning of an artistic development in a 'young nation' where color had the greatest potential to become a key for a new form of visual expression. For Reiss, the term 'color' transcended the use on canvas after his trip to Mexico as the diary aptly documents. With his particular interest in folk culture and the ethnic richness of North America, references to national 'embarrassment,' 'vulgarity,' and 'false pretenses' acquire a double meaning. Behind his comments on the use of color in the arts lurks a new political commitment to cultural pluralism and the promise of American democracy, which would soon permeate his drawings. The final entry of the "Mexico Diary" marks a turning point. Reiss recognizes the power of color both in an aesthetic and political sense.¹¹

Es hat nun 34 Jahre genommen, bis dies alles klar in mir war, doch jetzt ist es wie eine Hand, die meinen Weg bestimmt. Wir müssen nicht schwach sein in unserem Glauben, der Glaube muss uns stolz und lebensmutig machen und alle, die uns berühren, müssen davon erhalten, denn wir sind nicht unser eigen, wir sind im Ganzen geboren und müssen im ganzen Grossen und nicht nur im Kleinen helfen. Keine Selbstsucht, kein Egoismus, und aus den Gräbern des Krieges wird eine neue, eine endlich bessere Welt erstehen. Wir haben den Schlüssel in der Hand—nur können sie alle das Schloss nicht finden, da sie stets nach der falschen Seite laufen. Sterbe, Eitelkeit, und erzeuge ein Geschlecht grosser und selbstloser Menschen. Menschlich sein heisst die neue Religion, und der Tempel sind wir selbst, und unsere Taten und die Nahrung, die wir geben, ist das Glück, das aus uns strahlt. (MS)

IV.

In the early 1920s, Winold Reiss's portraits from Mexico were published in several newspapers as well as magazines such as *Century* or *Survey Graphic*. Katherine Anne Porter set the tone for future references to Reiss's work. As editor in chief for the *Survey Graphic* special edition *Mexico: A Promise* in 1924, she described the power of the images as follows: "Up and down a troubled land, in the au-

new concept of race which was very much in line with what Winold Reiss tried to translate into forms and colors on canvas. Vasconcelos predicted the coming of a new age which he called the Aesthetic Era. Here, joy, love, fantasy, and creativity would prevail over the rationalism he saw as dominating the present age. Arguing for a fusion of races into a new cosmic race he considered the *mestizo*, the Indian, and the Black superior to the White race "in a countless number of properly spiritual capacities" (32). In his transnational outline, he insisted that the Iberian part of the continent held the highest promise since the Iberian part possessed "the spiritual factors, the race, and the territory necessary for the great enterprise of initiating the new universal era of Humanity" (38-39).

¹¹ Reiss envisaged a future generation of world citizens in which the term 'color' would not function as a marker of racial or ethnic hierarchies. Thus, the diary represents a story of a rite of passage starting with an innocent disillusion of the promise of American democracy and ending on a self-confident dedication to using art as a means to work towards a new concept of universal humanity.

tumn and winter of 1920¹² the painter [Winold Reiss] made his tranquil pilgrimage, meeting friendliness and courtesy and faithfully recording not only the faces but also the spirit of a people" (153). With her reference to the kind of faithful dedication which Reiss's portraits exhibit, Porter implies that the viewer can find an authenticity in the depictions which former representations of Mexicans were lacking. The combination of counterbalancing allegedly less truthful portraits of non-European people in the Americas and bringing out a sense of spiritual dignity finds an echo in the explanatory notes which Alain Locke added to the artwork Reiss produced for the *Survey Graphic* special edition on *Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro* about a year after Porter's *Mexico* edition:

Concretely in his portrait sketches, abstract in his symbolic designs, [Winold Reiss] has aimed to portray the soul and spirit of a people [sic]. And by the simple but rare process of not setting up petty canons in face of nature's own artistry, Winold Reiss has achieved what amounts to a revealing discovery of the significance, human and artistic, of one of the great dialects of human physiognomy, of some of the little understood but powerful idioms of nature's speech. (651)

One might wonder how far Reiss could intimately enter into the "spirit of a people," in Katherine Porter's sense, after spending only three months in Mexico and similarly in Harlem, according to Alain Locke. The "Mexico Diary" shows that Reiss had a clear idea of what he was looking for and what kind of emotional response he expected from his trip south of the U.S. border. After all, Reiss references right away preconceived images from movie theatres, which triggered a certain response after entering Mexican territory. No doubt, he knew about Alexander von Humboldt's travels to Mexico and was familiar with the Mexican imaginary in German cultural history.¹³ To a certain degree, the arrival in Mexico and the encounters with Zapatista soldiers, descendants of Aztec people, ancient ruins, colourful markets, and so on, functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Escaping from U.S.-American metropolitan life and the experience of spending three months in Mexico revealed to Reiss how he could contribute to the then prevalent discourse on 'Transnational America' and 'Democracy vs. the Melting Pot' by thinkers such as Randolph Bourne or Horace Kallen. Compared to Reiss's

¹² Porter misdates the trip as 1921 in the article.

¹³ Between 1823 (in which Mexico gained independence) and World War II, Mexico became a target of German immigration, mainly for political refugees, prosperous merchants, or coffee planters. Christian Sartorius, a friend of the German immigrant Charles Follen, who was well known as a staunch supporter of abolitionism and a professor of German literature at Harvard, fled from Metternich's political repressions to Mexico, where he produced an important account of the history and culture of Mexico. Sartorius's book *Mexiko: Landschaftsbilder und Skizzen aus dem Volksleben* was lushly illustrated and appeared in both German and English translations (*Mexico: Landscapes and Popular Sketches*). This account was based on public lectures he held during a three-year stay back in Germany between 1849 and 1852 before he returned for good to Mexico. The visually rich publication became a touchstone for thousands of German-speaking immigrants in the mid-1860s who flocked to Mexico due to the liberal *Reforma* supported by the Austrian-born Emperor Maximilian, which fostered free trade and individual ownership of land. One of the prominent German immigrants in the art world was Carl Wilhelm Kahlo (who later called himself Guillermo), whose daughter Frieda entered with Diego Rivera the New York art scene at the time Reiss produced his Mexican murals and shaped the imaginary space of Harlem.

work in advertisement in Germany with his representations of Indians or African Americans, the year 1920 clearly marks a turning point in his career.¹⁴

The search for a new race of great and selfless men took shape in Mexico and drew Reiss to the issue of the color line (as invoked by Du Bois) back in New York. The "Mexico Diary" and the artwork of Reiss's Mexican experience reconfigure familiar visual narratives of the Harlem Renaissance in a transnational context. Reiss's portraits of African Americans blend a longing for rustic German peasant life with the fantasy of a pre-Columbian harmony between land and people in Mexico. They clearly express his efforts to fashion himself as a central, vital, and innovative artistic force in the metropolitan center of New York. His contributions to the New Negro Movement and his support of the African American cause of racial uplift through the means of portraiture, graphic design, and interior design emerges as an artistic response from the intercultural encounters Reiss experienced south of the Rio Grande. The analysis of Winold Reiss's stylistic development reveals that the iconic visual language of the Harlem Renaissance represents a product of both transatlantic and Latin American detours.

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¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion on the nexus, see my upcoming article "Portraying Transnational America: Aesthetic and Political Dimensions in Winold Reiss's 'Plea for Color'" in *Transnational American Studies*.