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Robert M. Petersen in Mexico: On His Own and Among Others

NATHANIEL R. RACINE

Although best known for the handful of lyrics he wrote for the Grateful Dead, Robert M. “Bobby” Petersen (1938–1987) was first and foremost a poet. Involved in the Bay Area countercultural scene in the 1960s and 1970s, he led an itinerant life “from Vancouver to Guadalajara,” as fellow lyricist and poet Robert Hunter writes in his foreword to *Alleys of the Heart* (1988, vi), Petersen’s book of posthumously collected poetry. Petersen’s poems document his travels and sojourns, and Mexico was a favorite destination, reflected in four poems in *Alleys*. This essay presents a preliminary reading of those poems, each of which was first published in his early collection *Far Away Radios* (1980) and identified as having been written in Mexico in the mid-1970s in Ajijic, on the shores of Lake Chapala, or in Yelapa, on the Pacific Coast.

Located in the western state of Jalisco, both locations were popular on the expatriate circuit in Mexico. In these four poems, “For Lucio Cabanas” (1974), “This Night” (1975), “Portrait: Laughing Gull” (1975), and the undated “Breakfast at Eliodoro’s,” the reader catches a glimpse of Petersen among the many writers and artists from the United States who found inspiration in Mexico throughout the twentieth century. That context situates Petersen’s work in a much larger collage of poetry written in and about Mexico by a diverse set of better-known writers. From that perspective, some of the literary, historical, countercultural, and international contexts of his poetry can be combined, helping to answer an interrelated set of questions: First, how does Petersen’s poetry contribute to the perennial discussion of how US writers, artists, and intellectuals

have interpreted Mexico? Second, what does Petersen contribute when restored to the larger canon of twentieth-century US poetry? And, finally, for Grateful Dead studies, how can this place-based approach expand the prospect from which we view the intersection of the Grateful Dead, the San Francisco counterculture, and the larger patterns found in US culture during the postwar era? The need to reintegrate figures such as Petersen into the discussion of these larger critical issues has “ample precedent,” as Nicholas Meriwether writes in his own essay on Petersen, given how “Cultural historians have long concentrated on marginal and forgotten figures” (2014, 110).

Petersen’s Mexican poems place him among a long list of writers from the United States inspired by that country, including John Brandi, Witter Bynner, Gregory Corso, Hart Crane, Robert Creeley, Edward Dahlberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, Paul Goodman, Robert Hayden, Langston Hughes, Randall Jarrell, Lysander Kemp, Jack Kerouac, Denise Levertov, Robert Lowell, Archibald MacLeish, Michael McClure, Charles Olson, Kenneth Rexroth, Selden Rodman, Muriel Rukeyser, Tennessee Williams, and William Carlos Williams. These writers represent a wide array of poetic techniques, but their point of overlap in Mexico is significant. The shared qualities of their Mexican poems include the perspective of the “gringo” outsider and a fragmented, impressionistic depiction of the Mexican scene. So too do they all focus attention on everyday life in Mexico, punctuating their observations by drawing the reader’s attention to broader socioeconomic and political concerns. This is a point made by Drewey Wayne Gunn’s seminal 1974 study *American and British Writers in Mexico*. As he notes in his Introduction, “the foreign writer in Mexico was singularly affected by events within the country itself. [...] the writer in Mexico, cut off from his own kind, was more attuned to political, social, and economic movements. He often felt the need to ponder the significance of the everyday world around him” (1974, xi). Petersen and many of his contemporaries are no different in this regard.

Amid the complexity of postwar US cultural history, Petersen can be found between two important moments—and this is reflected in his work. As Christian Crumlish notes, Petersen offers a line of “Continuity, of a lineage from the past through the Beats, the Haight scene, and into the future” (Crumlish 2012, 221). That lineage can similarly be found

in Petersen's engagement with modernist poetry more generally, Peter Connors writes, as his context will compel the reader to "examine both lineage (that which informs the work) and technique (the execution of those influences) under the presumption that the content will be a reflection of the poet's intellectual preoccupations" (Connors 2014, 79). Connors also notes that Petersen's method has more in common with the Black Mountain Poets—what one might call "second generation" modernists—than with that of the Beat Generation, although Petersen read exemplars of both schools, as his library attests.¹ Although the reader will note their markedly different techniques, there is room for comparison among Petersen's Mexican poetry and that of Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and John Brandi, if only on the grounds of the intellectual preoccupations that inform their lineages: all four depict Mexico and its culture through the self-aware, impressionistic lens so often adopted by the North American traveler in Mexico.

As Gunn suggests, that stance is visible across generations of visitors to the country, and one might trace it through a wide range of poets, from Langston Hughes and Witter Bynner to Randall Jarrell and Robert Hayden. For example, Witter Bynner's poem, "Market Day," from *Indian Earth* (1929), could easily be included here, as the first verse of that poem depicts people from towns along the shores of Lake Chapala—Jocotepec, Tuzcueca, Tizapan—coming to the Saturday market to the town of Chapala, near Ajijic, on the northern shore of the same lake (1929, 12). Yet all four poets serve as interesting examples, each one bringing his readers into the public markets of Mexico, where most tourists—and most wandering poets, it seems—will find themselves at some point during their visit to the country. Frequented by locals and sought-out by visitors, the ubiquity of the market offers a glimpse of Mexican society: the lived experience of the everyday world around them.

Hughes, for example, includes the short poem, "Mexican Market Woman" in *The Weary Blues* (1926) and, some twenty years later, Jarrell finds himself in similar surroundings in his short poem, "An Indian Market in Mexico" (1945). Gunn notes the origins of both poems, explaining that Hughes' poem can be traced to his time in Mexico with his father as a youth. That difficult period became a source of conflict with his mother

back in the US, and he “turned to poetry for solace”; his earliest poems published in *Crisis* can be traced to this period (1974, 83–84). Jarrell’s poem dates to summer 1942, when he visited Mexico with his first wife; Gunn notes that “A small country market near Guadalajara inspired the poem” (1974, 215). Despite the abundance of goods in the market stalls, both Hughes and Jarrell see hardship and poverty. Hughes begins by observing “This ancient hag / Who sits upon the ground / Selling her scanty wares” (Hughes 1926, 61); Jarrell offers a wider lens, noting the candy for sale, the bees buzzing around the dogs, cats, babies, children, and mothers, along with the buying, selling, and stealing of goods: “It is there,” he writes, “and, bad or good, / It works like a universe” (Jarrell 1969, 439). Although Hughes identifies the indigenous ethnicity of the woman in his poem—“Her skin so brown” (Hughes 1926, 61)—she otherwise remains distant, inscrutable, a function of her having “known high wind-swept mountains” (Hughes 1926, 61).

Hughes appreciated the mountains of Mexico and the distinctiveness of the people who live there, writing with great sympathy and understanding of Mexico’s cultural nuances and complexities. His autobiographical volumes, *The Big Sea* (1940) and *I Wonder As I Wander* (1956), contain insightful passages that include anecdotes from his time living in Mexico as a boy with his father and later as a young man in Mexico City. Although Hughes wrote a great deal while in Mexico, despite the tropical setting of many of his poems, Gunn writes, only “Mexican Market Woman” can be said to be “indisputably Mexican” (83).

Distance also figures prominently in Jarrell’s poems, but on a socio-economic level; as he writes in “An Indian Market in Mexico”:

To say bad to their good, to bargain
For a people’s life like a plate,
Is as easy as life for the strangers. (Jarrell 1969, 439)

Both Hughes and Jarrell are outsiders in Mexico, but both maintain a sense of self-awareness, recognizing the vast differences and their implications—realizations often missed or willfully ignored by foreign visitors searching for the sanitized and sunny, “colorful,” touristic side of Mexico.

Robert Hayden is similarly preoccupied in his poem “Market,” the sixth of eight poems published as “An Inference of Mexico” (1962).

Each poem in Hayden's sequence provides a meditative fragment from a Mexican scene; the other seven take the reader from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the Port of Veracruz and to the city of Cuernavaca. Hayden travels into unnamed mountains, through markets and to a bullring, as well as among ancient Mesoamerican idols and Catholic churches. Those lines also record the poverty surrounding the riches of the market stalls. The refrain in this poem is "por caridad," cried out to the tourists later described as "creatures / who have walked / on seas of money all / [their] foreign lives! / por caridad" (Hayden 1985, 23). A direct English translation of "por caridad" would be "for charity," and its etymology is well-suited for the situation described in Hayden's poem. From the Latin *caritas*, indicating Christian love of one's fellow man, here it underscores the distance between the foreign observers and the locals being observed; it is a gulf more cultural than linguistic, and Hayden effectively captures that troubling reality. Hayden, Jarrell, and Hughes all distance themselves from the many foreign tourists who uncomfortably look the other way. All three poet-travelers focus on the market as a site to present Mexico as a distinctive and culturally-specific setting, portraying universal human social practices through sympathetic observations of reality and everyday life.

That approach provides an important precedent for other writers, but these three poets also offer a glimpse of the country through the impressionistic fragment, another shared trait among twentieth-century US poets in Mexico. In the Beats, the reader finds this same approach. Gregory Corso's *Gasoline* (1958) includes a few Mexican poems, notably "Mexican Impressions." The 242 "choruses" that comprise Jack Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* (1959) are perhaps the most well-known examples of this technique, although the degree to which Mexico or its capital city are present is debatable. Although Kerouac is much more engaged with Mexico in his prose works, here "Mexico, even when textually present, is often absent in terms of Kerouac representing and commenting upon the country's contemporary political and cultural realities," as Glenn Sheldon notes (2004, 31), adding that "Kerouac, it seems, was less invested in the authenticity of Mexico than in using that country as a means of writing America" (2004, 32). Sheldon argues that Corso is also "strangely alien-

ated from the subject of Mexico” (2004, 67). By contrast, the Mexican poetry of Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and John Brandi demonstrates a more sustained engagement with Mexico while also using the fragment and the impression to great effect in structuring their works.

The first of these, Allen Ginsberg’s 1955 *Siesta in Xbalba and Return to the States* (more commonly spelled “Xibalba”), is divided into two parts, as its title suggests. Both involve a great deal of movement, but in very different ways. In the first part, Ginsberg is napping in a hammock and his imagination, aided by hallucinogens, opens up to a sort of pan-Mayan reverie, climbing pyramids and exploring ruins at Uxmal, Chichén Itzá, Tulum, Palenque, Kabah, Piedras Negras, and Yaxchilan. Yet, as important as his attempt to transcend the physical world, his memories return to the more material circumstances of his recent past among friends and fellow artists and intellectuals in New York City: “Dreaming back I saw / an eternal Kodachrome / souvenir of a gathering / of souls at a party” (1963, 22). These snapshots of the past interrupt his contemplation of Palenque, so “the geographical journey [becomes] inseparably intertwined with a mental voyage of self-exploration,” Franca Bellarsi observes (2013, 249). It is this interiority that seemingly prevents the poet from ever fully transcending his state of suspended animation between dream and reality, between past and present.

This state becomes both metaphorical and literal: in his mind’s wanderings between the Mayan ruins and New York City, in his dozing state between sleep and wakefulness, and in his hammock between two trees. In his extended reading of the poem, Ballarsi reads Ginsberg’s position as “between dimensions” in the context of his desire for a “revolution in consciousness,” which is “never fully attain[ed]” (2013, 249). The movement in the second half of the poem is more literal and more directed, documenting Ginsberg’s “return” to the US on a trajectory from southeast to northwest, covering a path from Chiapas to Veracruz to Guanajuato and San Miguel de Allende to Mexicali, ending in Los Angeles. For Gunn, although “Return to the States” was “working with some of the same themes,” the poem ultimately “fails to equal ‘Siesta’”:

Bits of local color [...] and the frightening view of the United States with which the poem closes do not cohere, and the whole

work seems anticlimactic after the perfection of ‘Siesta.’ But he was preparing for ‘Howl’ and its condemnation of America; from the introspective moment in Mexico. (1974, 224)

In form, Ginsberg’s poem is composed of lines significantly shorter than what one might expect, given that it was published a year before *Howl* (1956) and its long lines, but as they wind down the page in brief phrases, the rhythm begins to match the images and fragments of memory found scattered throughout the fitfulness of his waking dreams.

As its subtitle suggests, in *The Mexican Night: Travel Journal* (1970), Lawrence Ferlinghetti is always on the move across the Mexican landscape. The blocks of prose-poetry contained within the book are marked by dates and locations spanning several years, including “195?,” 1961, 1962, 1968, and 1969, and visiting places including the cities—listed roughly from northwest to southeast—of Ensenada, Topolobampo, Guadalajara, Mexico City, and Oaxaca, as well as the ruins at Mitla and Uxmal. His entries for the fall of 1968 are primarily written in Oaxaca, focusing on protests against the Summer Olympics that will soon take place in Mexico City. While he reads the signs outside the University of Oaxaca that shout the slogans “TIERRA Y LIBERTAD, OLYMPIAD DE HAMBRE, VIVA LA JUVENT[U]D,” among others, Ferlinghetti directs the reader’s attention “around the corner” from the main plaza, where

a blind guitar player squatting in the dust, playing & singing very quietly in the semi-dark of the side-street, his steady low voice an undertone beneath the shouted political voices [...] chipped white enamel tin cup, empty, clamped between his knees, beneath another sign: PUEBLO UNETE A TUS HERMANOS. Applause for the speakers, the singer’s cup empty. (Ferlinghetti 1970, 24–25)

Ferlinghetti goes on to describe the scene and its juxtapositions, emphasizing the same socioeconomic disparity seen in the markets by other poets while contrasting that grim reality with the political reality of national protest movements, finding them guilty of the same negligence as the willfully myopic tourists. All of this is implied through observation, however: Ferlinghetti provides no explicit commentary, remaining a solitary wanderer and outside observer in Mexico.

It is in such a plaza that one finds John Brandi in his *Poem Afternoon in a Square of Guadalajara* (1970). Far different in form, though not in perceptiveness, the poem treats the sights and sounds of a Mexican plaza in much the same way that other poets do the market, seeing it as culturally specific yet immediately recognizable in terms of the activities it fosters. The four-page poem comprises ten paragraph-like blocks of text, unequal in length and, in that way, not unlike the slightly irregular grid pattern found in the center of Guadalajara itself. Here, though, Brandi seems intent on chronicling everything within his field of vision, while simultaneously indulging in the many distractions that surround him. Mingling with the Mexican locals, he briefly encounters an English girl, an Armenian, a Frenchman, a German, and a group of gringos. Intermixed with mariachi, he hears scraps of songs by Paul McCartney, Ravi Shankar, and Donovan. The objects he finds in the scene are equally eclectic, including a late-model Nash, a Schwinn bicycle, Tigre cigarettes, and advertisements for Pepsi-Cola and Sears Roebuck. As much as he places himself in Guadalajara and seems intent on being there, the scene is simultaneously international.

For anyone looking to escape the US or global culture, the final line of the poem reads “O Most Great Humanity!—” (Brandi 1970, 4), an exclamation that, although tinged with melancholy, reminds the reader of what one actually observes when traveling in Mexico, or anywhere else. Although it presents a scene of everyday social activity, the poem’s qualities—the self-awareness of the poet as an outsider offering a solitary vision with an attention to setting and daily life, occasionally punctuated by broader political sympathies—are all carefully arranged within the fragmented impressions and images offered to the reader.

This framework of potential influence and lineage helps to illuminate Petersen’s related but unique approach to Mexico. The first of Petersen’s four Mexican poems is “For Lucio Cabanas.” In its eight three-line stanzas, Petersen’s gaze roams from “a crucifix / erected for some saint” along the lakeshore, to washerwomen and chickens, to the sound of a boat on the water to the colors of the sky and clouds, to “the mountains / of michoacan,” to men “firing tile” in kilns, to women begging in the plaza, crying “socorro! socorro!” (1988, 53). Like *por caridad, socorro*

is a cry for help or aid, which can also be translated as “assistance” or “relief.”

These first seven stanzas paint a rich scene in few words, averaging just ten per stanza. The immediate foreground of this daily life, however, is interrupted in the final stanza which reads, simply: “& in the south / it is said they have killed / cabanas” (1988, 53). The reference is to Lucio Cabañas, the rural schoolteacher and guerilla leader from the state of Guerrero, where he led the Party of the Poor (in Spanish, the *Partido de los Pobres*, or PDLP); he died on December 2, 1974, either in combat (the official account), or, as more recent accounts suggest, from either “extrajudicial execution” by the military or suicide to avoid capture (Aviña 2014, 159–160). It was later that same month when Petersen composed the poem. The economy of phrasing and the brief portrait of human activity on the shores of Lake Chapala paints a picture of isolation, untouched by events in a remote region of Guerrero. Yet the silence that ends the poem—the name Cabañas appears alone, a single word on the final line—suggests that, perhaps, the quotidian nature of violence and political assassination in one place is never far away from everyday life elsewhere in Mexico.

Though separate and unique, both “This Night” and “Portrait: Laughing Gull” exhibit a thematic resonance with the fourth and much longer poem, “Breakfast at Eliodoro’s,” which finds Petersen in the remote coastal town of Yelapa. South of Puerto Vallarta and accessible only by boat, that location is important: the town is nestled on the shoreline, perched on the slope where the mountain meets the sea. From his seat in Eliodoro’s, a restaurant and public gathering place located in central Yelapa, Petersen has a commanding view of his surroundings. The poem describes a scene composed of fragments that fit together fluidly as his gaze roams back and forth from hillside to shoreline. The first scene mentions “one eyed luis,” a key figure in “This Night” whose job is to haul cargo up the hill in the same way his forbears did, with “head strap [and] back grip. / the ancient way” of transporting “lumber, stone / & maize” (1988, 56). But, the poet remarks, “today / it will be / cartons / of beer / tanks / of propane / 100 kilos / of river sand / or, / some gringo’s damn refrigerator ...” (1988, 57). The work that Luis does is hard work and

honest toil; the difference between the cargo he carries today and the one transported by his ancestors has less to do with its weight and the effort required to carry it than with modernity and society, and the changes defined by urban conveniences. Regardless, then as now, better to do such work before the heat of the day, and Luis's activities—along with the others Petersen notes—are framed by time and space in Yelapa, where the delayed sunrise lingers behind the hills surrounding the coastal village.

Human beings are only part of the scene, and Petersen's observations include the richness and variety of the region's flora and fauna. In his first of several listings of animal life, Petersen dwells on birds on the shore: a crow, a tiger heron, and an aplomado (kestrel), recalling the titular bird soaring above the scene in "Laughing Gull." While his glance strays to the fishermen, the poet quickly looks beyond them and further out to sea, contemplating manta rays, huachinango (red snapper), tiburón (shark), auks, porpoises, and whales. When Petersen's view returns to the human world, he glances at Don Angel who "stands on the playita / barefoot, pants / rolled to the knee" (1988, 60). Little more is said about Don Angel—likely a fisherman—but it becomes clear that he is as much a part of the larger ecosystem as the other animals who are awakening to the start of a new day.

It is this element, time, that further organizes this poem. The title, after all, indicates that it is time for breakfast. The first line reads, "shadow upon shadow. another dawn conceived" and is punctuated by moments of changing light, from "a crystal moment, the light is frozen, then alters / to yellow turquoise, dull mauve / & gold" (1988, 56; 57). And, later on: "Bright & brighter yet / dawn moves / west" and "further light streams / from behind the mountain / abolishing shadow" (1988, 59; 60). Finally, toward the end, "upriver the sun suddenly breaks loose from / the ridge" which is followed shortly by the simple remark that it is "another / beautiful / day" (1988, 63). The poem ends as the day begins.

Both the geography of Yelapa and the rhythms of the day shape the form of the poem, which looks drastically different from the blocks of prose-poetry that comprise Brandi's *Guadalajara* and much of Ferlinghetti's *Mexican Night*. While they more closely resemble the short lines of Ginsberg's *Siesta in Xibalba*, they rarely if ever contain

the same restlessness or interiority. Indeed, in one of Ginsberg's journal entries from late July 1956, he reflects on rereading "Siesta in Xbalba," commenting: "first impression, unbalanced & egoistic," and continues his critique along the same lines, ending with the revealing remark that it "seems shallow while I'm reading the Life of St. Francis" (1995, 293).

Petersen's Mexican poems, however, convey a sense of peace and comfort. The reader follows Petersen's sparse language as it ebbs and flows across the field of composition provided by the page of Petersen's notebook. The arrangement of the words comes to resemble the place where he is—the shoreline and the rhythmic motion of the waves, synchronized perhaps with the rhythms of his own breath and words, along with the tides and even the rhythms of the earth itself, as "the sphere turns intelligently" (1988, 58). This also points to the influence of the Black Mountain Poets on Petersen: Robert Creeley's poem, *Mazatlan: Sea* (1969), was published in San Francisco only a few years before Peterson's own poetry from the western coast of Mexico. As in Petersen's poem, the words cling to the left-hand margin, ebbing-and-flowing into the negative space of the page. The vantage point and structure, however, are about all that Creeley's poem shares with Petersen's, as Creeley's is one of interiority and personal reflection seemingly inspired by his removal to that location which, simultaneously, removes it almost entirely from that same geography.

The closing imagery of the poem reveals his presence along with everything else he has documented: "at eliodoro's / the crazy gringo poet / tipples a breakfast / beer / scribbling delight" (1988, 63). The poem is thus framed by the perspective of the gringo, but so, too, is it framed by the very presence of the gringo. Always the outsider, the gringo does not belong *in* Mexico, but in some respect always belongs *to* Mexico, and is thus a part of the scene. Petersen seems comfortable in that position, evident in the way the form of "Breakfast at Eliodoro's" corresponds to a larger sequence of phenomena that cross the poet's field of vision. As they are seen, they are recorded, and the many passing impressions are brought into concert by the very immediacy of the everyday world in all its ordinariness and profundity.

Most of this essay has been an attempt to situate Petersen's published Mexican poems among patterns of influence, whether thematic or

formal—a preliminary gesture pointing to future research and analysis, as a great deal of Petersen’s poetry remains unpublished. What of Mexico does he include elsewhere? At least one of his unpublished notebooks suggests that these same patterns figure more broadly in his thinking, a topic to be explored in a later work.² Although the poems discussed here represent only a fraction of those found in *Alleys of the Heart*, they place the reader with Petersen in Mexico, sitting beside him at Eliodoro’s, offering a vantage point from which to glance north—from Guadalajara to Vancouver, as Hunter noted. That perspective—as aware of his immediate surroundings as he is of its resonance with the wider world around him—places Petersen’s work alongside the poets surveyed here. His Mexican poems show him to be a sensitive reader of the nuances and caprices of Mexico, informed by his own unique attunement to the unity, both human and ecological, of the Pacific Slope of North America.

Notes

1. Nicholas G. Meriwether catalogued Petersen’s library in 2016; I am indebted to him for sharing that catalog with me. Although Petersen’s itinerant lifestyle and generosity meant that his library changed over time, at the time of his death it included volumes of Charles Olson, Gregory Corso, and Ferlinghetti’s *The Mexican Night*.
2. At least one of Petersen’s Mexico notebooks survives in private hands; I am grateful to Nicholas Meriwether for sharing that with me.

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