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Margaret A. Porter Collection

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**Author**

Gonzalez, Gloria

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## MARGARET A. PORTER COLLECTION

**A**S I PROCESSED the papers and other materials in the Margaret A. Porter Collection, I learned about much about Margaret's life and work but I also came to realize the importance of bringing such collections like this into the light. The Porter papers provide an excellent example of how significant archival material can document the life of someone from an underrepresented community and also demonstrate the struggles and achievements of a lesbian whose life spanned almost the entire twentieth century.

Margaret Porter was most known for her poetry and for her translations from the French of poetry by Renee Vivien and Natalie Clifford Barney. In addition to Porter's original and translated poetry, the collection contains her personal diaries, which span over six decades of her life,

photographs, and correspondence. In addition, there are materials from her activity in San Diego-based lesbian organizations and documents from her research on Vivien, Barney, and other women in expatriate France.

Porter was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on April 30, 1911 and raised in the Midwest. In an interview with the historian J.R. Roberts, she explained that she knew she was "different" from the age of nine but she didn't know the word "lesbian." Later she thought of herself as "one of a chosen few" like Sappho, Oscar Wilde and Tchaikovsky. As she was growing up, she could see no profit in being a woman, girl's clothes, or women's roles and wanted to be a boy. So she pretended she was one, and developed a detailed imaginary life at a young age. This imaginary life would turn out to be the foundation for much of



**Margaret A. Porter (left) in the 1930s.**



**Scenes from a active life: Margaret A. Porter Collec-  
tion in the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives**

her poetry as she later used it to create several *noms de plume*. Margaret had a lifetime interest in France and anything French, which was reflected in the characters in her imaginary life. These included Pierre E. Renet, Gabrielle L'Autre, and an ideal woman and muse named Alys.

She attended Marquette University, where she received a B.A. in journalism. While in college, Porter first published under the name Pierre E. Renet. All her life, she always made it a point to clarify that she was not a “lesbian poet” but rather, a poet that wrote and translated some lesbian poetry.

The materials in the collection also cover several other periods in Margaret’s life, including her trips to France, her service in the Women’s Army Corps (her uniform is also in the collection), and her time traveling around the United States as a vagabond. While living in Oceanside in her later life, she worked closely with William Moritz to research and translate poetry of Vivien and others. Moritz, who was best known for his research in film history, was fluent in Greek and translated the poetry

of Sappho, while Margaret translated the poetry of Vivien. Margaret’s translations received high praise because she often successfully projected the meter and rhyme of the French original in the English translation, as well as capturing the emotional qualities. Along with Catherine Kroger, Porter was the first to publish English versions of Renee Vivien’s poetry in their book, *Muse of the Violets*, which was published in 1977.

Although the majority of Porter’s own written work remains unpublished, she often contributed to small press publications including *The Archer*, *New Athenaeum*, *South and West*, *Tres Femme*, and *The Ladder* in the 1960s and 1970s. During the same period, she became active in lesbian and feminist groups. Porter served as editor for the local chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis and later as co-founder of the groups Search and Tres Femme, for which she also wrote and edited newsletters and serial publications.

When Porter died on May 30, 1989, at the age of 78, she donated some materials to the Kinsey Institute

Library at Indiana University and gave the rest to William Moritz, who later donated them to the June L. Mazer Lesbian Archives. In a 1979 letter to Porter, a friend wrote, “. . . what a great need that exists for your words to be preserved for future lesbian women.” The processing of the Porter papers—a cooperative effort by between the Mazer Archives, the Center for the Study of Women, and UCLA Special Collections—fills that need by ensuring that Margaret’s work is not only preserved but also made widely accessible.

– Gloria Gonzalez

*Gloria Gonzalez is a M.L.I.S. student in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA and a fellow at the Center for Primary Research and Training working on “Making Invisible Histories Visible: Preserving the Legacy of Lesbian Feminist Activism and Writing in Los Angeles,” a three-year project partially funded by the NEH to arrange, describe, digitize, and make physically and electronically accessible two major clusters of Mazer collections related to West Coast lesbian/feminist activism and writing since the 1930s.*