Hemispheric Imaginations

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GENDERED PERCEPTIONS OF LATIN AMERICA IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY US LITERATURE

[A] subtle differentiation on both sides of the biological barrier, structured by the recognition of a social law to be assumed in order ceaselessly to be contested

As we have seen in previous chapters, questions of gender are never far from inquiries into the nature of ethnic alterity. Stockton’s and Davis’s novels exemplify the binarist, masculine-feminine concept of the active, superior, invading United States and its representatives on the one hand and the passive, submissive, and at best sensually attractive south on the other. This finds its sequel in early twentieth-century primitivism, as in Porter’s portrayal of María Concepción, whose activity amounts to a violent reestablishment of the old order. As the century went on, gender roles were often, but not always, seen as more complex. Sometimes, Latin American women, such as Beals’s Esperanza, Hergesheimer’s La Clavel, or Gonzales’s Consuelo, gain considerable agency and demonstrate that feminism and changes in the concept of gender roles are not a North American privilege. When Consuelo becomes a sniper in the Mexican Revolution, and a cynic at that, she goes beyond the “tender violence” of the US female photographers in Laura Wexler’s book by this title, who by their domestic-looking images, by masking the violence going on, in fact were accomplices of racism and imperialist brutality at the end of the nineteenth century.

The assumption in such texts and other cultural representations is that there are two genders and that they stand in some form of power relation. The rigid binarism implied here looks absurd in the age of Third Wave feminism with its emphasis on the constructedness and fluidity of sexual and gender identities beyond femaleness and maleness, and on the intersection of race and gender, resulting in the development of a variety of feminisms outside the one originating from and focused on the needs of white middle-class women, a charge often leveled against the Second Wave. Black fem-
isms like Alice Walker’s “Womanism” come to mind, or Ana Castillo’s Chicana “Xicanisma,” which will be briefly addressed later in this chapter.

However, on a level outside of recent feminist theory, we have to admit that the primary division of humankind into two—and not a plurality of—genders is a basic element of the construction of social order around the globe. Its underpinning is an uneven distribution of power, and thus a Foucauldian discourse that has regional, ethnic, and class varieties. Thus, while the constructedness of gender is not questioned, it makes sense to see two discourses of alterity, namely race (and by extension, ethnicity and other-culturality) and gender in their interaction. This chapter, then, deals with such interaction as it manifests itself in earlier and later twentieth-century literary texts. My question is whether Latinamericanism is reinforced or complicated or even counter-discursively subverted by this interaction. As will be seen, this interdiscursivity is made virulent not only by the historical varieties of the discourse of Latin American alterity, but also by the changes in the gender discourse of the period. I will refer therefore to gender models where they inform the fictions under discussion, but do not aim to follow the debates on gender theory beyond that.

The description of ethnic alterity in terms of gender and sexuality has a long history. Although it can be traced back to antiquity, in the Western tradition it became general practice in the age of colonialism, notably in texts related to the so-called New World. The *locus classicus* for a systematic argument along such lines, and an example that is particularly revealing for the purpose of a study of North American literature about Latin America, is Ginés de Sepúlveda’s application of so-called Aristotelian dichotomies of superiority and inferiority in the context of his debate with Bartolomé de Las Casas in the year 1550.1 As I have pointed out in Chapter 2, Sepúlveda classifies the *indios* as the inferior contrary of the Spaniards in a chain of opposites such as body versus soul, animals versus humans, and, notably, women versus men. The conflation of ethnic and sexual differences almost always entails the explication of the unfamiliar by means of the familiar, the naturalization of an asymmetrical distribution of power, and, finally, the element of self-definition that results from the definition of the Other (Uerlings 20).

Much of this type of analogically linked hierarchical binarism has survived into later European and North American notions of colonized peoples, notably US notions of Latin Americans.2 This continuity has been facilitated by specifically racist assumptions developed during the nineteenth and twentieth century. They complement and often overlay those on cultural difference. Mexicans, Guatemalans, and so forth were and often are collectively regarded as brown-skinned people, as “Indians,” often also as
unmanly if compared to American masculinity, and are presented as such in many literary texts, too. Race and gender are discursive constructions just like cultural identities, but they are still widely used in essentialist terms. Their intersection has long been a well-known phenomenon, but it was the coining of the term *intersectionality* in an article by law professor Kimberlé W. Crenshaw in 1989, and her own and others’ work since that publication, that has made intersectionality studies an important branch of social science, political studies, gender studies, and others. The argument that the interaction of social and biological identity formation factors such as gender, race, class, or sexual orientation defines the forms of marginalization of individuals and social groups more precisely than the focus on just one of these categories, as had been customary before, is convincing. However, because the object of my study is not to describe marginalization as a social “fact,” but the discursive construction of forms of otherness, I will use the term interdiscursivity rather than intersectionality.

The association of race and gender has been the focus of a number of critical studies, for instance Gail Bederman’s *Manliness and Civilization* and Robyn Wiegman’s *American Anatomies*, both dating from 1995. Notwithstanding their strangely reductionist tendency to equate race relations with white-black relations, such studies help to clarify the inherent contradictoriness of the identity discourse of (Western) civilization. Thus, for instance, the white fear of oversexed African males, of hypermasculinity, as it were, undermines the traditional association of whiteness with masculinity, control, and hence civilization. Human tendency to think in binary, linked pairs and the pitfalls inherent in such discourse was nicely illustrated by that old liberal slogan “blacks and women” used when speaking in favor of marginalized groups. An answer to this misleading binarism was given by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith in their groundbreaking volume of 1982, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, that helped diversify the Black movement by a black feminist branch and the Women’s Liberation movement by nonwhite feminisms.

During the last decades, many feminist critics have availed themselves of Jacques Derrida’s critique of the dichotomous tradition in Western logocentric philosophy. In many of his works, the French philosopher pointed out the insufficiency of thinking in such binary pairs as presence and absence, speech and writing, identity and alterity, man and woman. Difference in this tradition, says Derrida, means inequality, with one term functioning as the ostensibly less positive counterpart of the other—but also failing to function, as one opposite “bleeds over” into the other whenever one tries to define it. Just as he uses his analyses of older philosophical texts, that is, the
discursive tradition of Western philosophy, to point out the insufficiency of the dichotomous model to describe actual processes of thought, language and perception, so literary texts often subvert the very discourse they are part of. Derrida’s own reading of Nietzsche, for instance, brings us close to the core of the topic of this chapter. In *Spurs* (1972), Derrida points out how Nietzsche, the woman hater, for whom femininity is tantamount to unreason, by linking “woman” to metaphor and literary writing makes her in fact an ally in his own project of undermining traditional Western philosophy with its very claim to reason, to logical truth. Similarly, the linking of the two discursive fields of ethnic and of gender alterity may reveal a deconstructive potential. Though these discourses look structurally similar and thus facilitate processes of converging differentiation, their interdiscursive interaction may not only yield a mutual reinforcement of patterns of world perception and description, but, not infrequently, also open up a contrary and subversive field of the imaginary.3

**As long as gender** is seen and represented only as analogous to the identity-alterity dichotomy referred to in perceptions of ethnonational alterity, the contrastive force of the alterity discourse remains unquestioned. It is only when gender appears as a discursive field in its own right that things may become more complex. That this is by no means always the case is shown by numerous adventure novels using both sets of stereotypes for a negative or else positive characterization of some Latin American country, group, or individual. What I propose to do here is to look for examples of a destabilization of the two discourses by their interaction in a given text, to see whether this discursive interplay may not subvert the analogy of the Other in gender and ethnicity terms, whether the intersection of the discourses may not even have been used intentionally by the authors for the breaking up of binary patterns. Once again, my selection is intended to present a spectrum of possibilities, not a systematic overview. I want to demonstrate the potential of interdiscursivity, sometimes in texts where one might not expect such complexities. Because gender is a pervasive, inevitable aspect of human life, most texts analyzed elsewhere in this study might be examined in this context, too, and in some cases I do indeed return to my previous analyses. I use twentieth-century, mostly US American fictional texts for exemplification but will start with a nineteenth-century classic by way of illustrating the potential inherent in this interdiscursive process.

Herman Melville’s first novel *Typee* (1846) is not a text about Latin America but about the Pacific Marquesa Islands in the period of colonial expansion, yet also, in a way, about genderized perceptions of ethnic alterity in general. The starting point of the novel is familiar from numberless colo-
nial texts: the masculine protagonist and representative of a white, patriarchal, and superior order enters the world of an ethnic Other semanticized as feminine. Early in the novel, Melville has his fictional alter ego Tommo and his comrade unintentionally descend into the valley of the ferocious, cannibalistic tribe of the Typees, whom they had hoped to avoid. In their preconceived notions, the Typees represent the ethnic Other, savagism at its worst, because they have a record of violence not only against other tribes but also against colonial intruders. In Melville’s description, the descent of the two men through an unmistakably female genital topography can be read as a symbolic return to the womb. Subsequently, and following an old chain of analogy, the feminine in its Typee variety is made to appear as particularly close to nature. The beautiful Fayaway, who will be Tommo’s female companion for the weeks of his semi-captivity, represents the natural, “savage” state in a particularly soft and none-too-alien variety. Here a Victorian sexual fantasy has found its lusciously physical embodiment.

And yet Tommo’s dealings with this projection of male desire appear regressive rather than erotic. Due to a leg injury acquired during the descent, Tommo is helpless and has to be carried around like an infant—readers schooled in even a household version of Freudian psychology will recognize that he has suffered a symbolic castration. Thus the very scene that appears as the culmination of sexual wish fulfillment remains curiously ambivalent. Unbelievably, Fayaway has been released from the strict order defining the roles of men and women in her culture and, against the taboo, is lying in a boat with Tommo. Suddenly she gets up, takes her robe of tappa—the only piece of clothing she is wearing—from her shoulders and “spreading it out like a sail, stood erect with upraised arms in the head of the canoe. We American sailors pride ourselves upon our straight clean spars, but a prettier little mast than Fayaway made was never shipped a-board of any craft” (Typee, 134). The gender roles have been reversed, and vis-à-vis the feminine, Tommo finds himself once again on the level of what Julia Kristeva has defined as the semiotic, the pre-Oedipal stage of pre- and nonverbal drive articulation—after all, he cannot speak the language. By his return into the maternal **chora** he experiences the assault of the semiotic, which will restructure the symbolic order, that is, in Lacanian terms, the patriarchally defined linguistic-plus-cultural order, in this case the order of Western culture Tommo has been carrying along. The territories of the semiotic and the symbolic are linked by transitions in both directions. For Kristeva, the drive enters the universal order of signification, the “natural” language guaranteeing the social structure.

However, when Tommo is not on the lake, sporting with Fayaway, he finds himself in a different, alien symbolic order using its own “natural” language.
What terrifies him is not so much the suspension of his sexual identity as symbolized by the transfer of the phallus to Fayaway and thus the undoing of his male individuation, that is, his self-alienation. What he is mainly afraid of is the prospect of being swallowed by the alien culture. He faces the prospect of being swallowed in a literal sense, namely as a potential victim of cannibalism. According to Kristeva, the act of sacrifice turns violence into a signifier. It is therefore structurally related to an alternative procedure Tommo finds hardly less threatening: the submission to the Other by undergoing the body tattoo, because this would mean—once again, literally—an inscribing into the symbolic, into the order of language where individuation occurs and hence into an alien culture. In continuation of the regression metaphoric of the earlier parts of the novel, Tommo would then find himself reborn into the order of the Typees—a notion filling him with horror and an eventually successful desire to escape. While he is thus allowed to retreat behind the walls of American masculinity, Melville, the author, in the rich symbolism of his very first novel demonstrates an awareness of the relativity of cultural and gender identity, of the endless deferral of “truth” about the self and the Other, the masculine and the feminine, the outside and the inside, eating and being eaten. From the initial analogy between ethnic and gender alterity arises an interplay of the two alterity discourses that is productive of any degree of ambiguity, of a subversive questioning of both orders of social interaction: that of Victorian, patriarchally conceived gender relations and that of the superior Euro-American subject position vis-à-vis the “dark races.”

Interdiscursive border crossings can be perceived in much simpler terms, notably in such works of popular fiction seemingly intended to affirm all the binarisms the alterity discourse has in store. This applies to many novels in the context of imperialist expansion, even after World War I. And yet, there are surprising disruptions. In Rex Ellingwood Beach’s *Jungle Gold* (1935), the action is set at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century; Theodore Roosevelt’s ruthless policy regarding the Panama question is alluded to and finds the protagonist’s approval. The historical context is the establishment of the big American fruit companies in Central America. The protagonist, a handsome, blue-eyed giant with a name indicating his sense of mission, Steve Pentecost, founds a great banana plantation in the jungles of Honduras, becomes a railroad king, and manipulates local politics in conformity with his desires. He is a man without a past: “his origin was a mystery and his destination was uncertain. [. . .] He was [. . .] a man of peculiar detachment, at one moment as loving and at the next as ruthless as a child” (10).

A combination of Mysterious Stranger and American Adam, Steve em-
bodies US American masculinity in a purely future-oriented, expansionist, go-getting, rugged individualist variety. Again and again he leaves Hannah, his submissive yet resourceful American wife, behind in order to follow what he considers his destiny—the taming of the jungle: the foundation of an agribusiness empire against such obstacles as the often violent political opposition and the equally violent and sometimes criminal business competition, an incompetent and backward local population, or the forces of a wild and overpowering nature with hurricanes and earthquakes, floods, and diseases that kill great numbers of his workers, including those he has brought from the United States. Part of this destiny is to be found in the beautiful and vitalizing shape of Mamatoca, a Mayan woman representing wild, tropical nature whom he needs as his female counterpart: the source and aim of his drives, waiting to be conquered by him, “for in the fire of her primitive passion smoldered the very life force of the forest itself” (116). Steve thus turns into an increasingly savage robber baron reminiscent of Theodore Dreiser’s Cowperwood. He who represents the American pioneer spirit in its various historical shapes, also symbolizes the noncontrollability of instinctual nature. In subjugating the wilderness, in opening and, eventually, exploiting it, Steve reveals “something wild, inexorable, and vastly menacing about him” (169). His untamed inner nature leads to destruction when he appropriates the resources of civilization.

Civilization, on the other hand, manifests itself in the resistance against one’s desires. It is represented by Hannah, who also stands for the American past and tradition. She is of old pioneer stock and embodies a good deal of Calvinist belief and work ethics. She tries to fulfill the gender role allotted to nineteenth-century American women, that is, to exert a moralizing influence on her half-savage husband, an influence based on family values plus religion. The maternal role accrues to Hannah exclusively: Mamatoca, the representative of maternal nature, is forced by her tribe to abort Steve’s baby, an event that marks the beginning of her physical decline. Yet when the Pentecosts are increasingly estranged, Hannah grows to the additional public task of compensating for Steve’s misdeeds by acts of charity and by spreading a benign civilization—she builds a hospital and founds a city on the coast where living conditions are more salutary for the people. That is, she assumes the civilizing and tempering role that the bourgeois gender discourse assigned to women, but with a power and efficiency denied to most women of that period, and thus assumes the role of founding mother for parts of the country. At the same time, her husband increasingly falls prey to his instinctual nature and is rational only in terms of a goal-oriented pragmatism, without the controlling social responsibility the nineteenth century expected male leaders in politics and business to personify. Steve agrees to
his business partner’s proposition: “Let’s make this a white man’s country” (129), but it is Hannah who is much more successful in introducing North American standards—a kinder, gentler colonialism, we might say.8

Gender borders are crossed again in the way Beach presents the careers of Steve’s and Hannah’s children: the girl follows the passionate ways of her father; the son resembles his mother, and as Steve’s successor in the company introduces modern and more humane business methods. At no point does the novel indicate any doubt about the superiority of North American concepts of civilization over the “backward,” dirty and disease-ridden, politically anomic conditions in Central America. Yet in the course of unfolding a story of personal and economic successes and failures, binary concepts of nature and culture, passion and rationality, superior and inferior peoples, all of them epitomized in the gender relations acted out in this novel, are increasingly destabilized. If discourses define that which makes sense in a given society, the normative surface, as it were, they also carry along a subversive, “nonsensical” underside that tends to become apparent when they intersect with other discourses, a fact that finds its symbolic expression in Steve’s jungle death of a fever he has contracted from his dying “wilderness woman” (116). It remains anybody’s guess as to which extent this subversion reflects an authorial intention. Beach, known for his adventure novels with settings like the Klondike or the Canal Zone and an unlikely candidate for symbolic complexities, may simply have let the power of discourse(s) do its own work.

Beach’s book is still based on turn-of-the-century imperialist premises and late Victorian ideas of gender relations. It thrives on comparatively simple reversals, on an exchange of positions. The period after World War I, with its questioning of social, and in particular of gender norms, produced other and more ambitious fictions at the intersection of the discourses of gender and ethnicity that explore the changing, performative quality of discourses, cultures, identities, even bodies much more radically, whether the author does this intentionally or not. Reinhold Görling has shown how the differential aspects of cultures and societies are complemented by the production of interspaces or even non-spaces, heterotopias in Foucault’s terminology, where intercultural dialogue can take place beyond the projection of what is cultural practice within one’s own society. Often, in literary texts dealing with an internal alterity, the exotic is used as a heterotopic testing site for the study of alternate forms of existence and identity.

The most famous example of such experiments of the imaginary in the context of the European and North American discourse of Latin America, or, for that matter, of gender, is D. H. Lawrence’s Mexico novel The Plumed
Gendered Perceptions

Serpent (1926)—a British text that served as a model and touchstone for many North American writers. As Annegreth Horatschek has pointed out, Lawrence uses a Mexico in concordance with the whole range of then current stereotypes concerning that country, its population and cultural forms of expression, to develop a highly gendered model of alterity. Lawrence’s critique of post–World War I European society is developed in a series of ironic gender reversals. The British female protagonist Kate represents a male, logocentric European civilization that in Lawrence’s opinion has become decadent, weak, and in this sexist sense, effeminate. She escapes from her private traumata to the postrevolutionary Mexico of the early 1920s, where she finds the men feminine in a double sense. The urban mestizos disgust her as “fattish town men in black tight suits” (13); they are “the mongrel men of a mongrel city” (25), according to the widely held Western association of racial mixture with decadence. The disappointingly unheroic toreros are “effeminate-looking. [. . .] With their rather fat posteriors and their squiffs of pigtails and their clean-shaven faces, they looked like eunuchs, or women in tight pants” (19). If this negative linking of an obtrusive physicality with cultural deficiency seems to be reminiscent of the way early Europeans associated the “dark races” (158) with inferiority, femininity, the body, Lawrence’s reasoning is entirely different. These men appear as negative because of their intimate association with Western civilization. The pure indio men, on the other hand, are seen by Kate as overwhelmingly beautiful in a way that combines physical strength with features carrying primarily female connotations: softness, smoothness, relaxation, passivity: “Their very nakedness only revealed the soft, heavy depths of their natural secrecy, their eternal invisibility. They did not belong to the realm of that which comes forth” (131).

This association of female passivity with alterity has been described by Luce Irigaray and other feminist critics. Just as the patriarchal order regards woman as disruptive because with her supposed inaction she represents the “Other” of the male subject, of the male discourse, so Kate experiences these indios as disruptive of her Eurocentric concept of reality (Horatschek 677). When Kate joins the subversive indigenous movement founded by her Mexican friends, a movement urging the return to pre-Columbian cultural and religious practices, and when she ritualistically marries the indio general Cipriano, a “column of blood” (Plumed, 433), she takes part in the rediscovery of a dark race in more than one sense of the word, a “female” race, as it were, from which, in Lawrence’s gender-plus-culture heterotopia, a redefinition of masculinity might take its beginning.

Lawrence’s view of Mexico and his powerful descriptions of Mexican life have had a deep impact upon North American texts on Latin America.9
However, his tortured modernist-primitivist philosophy based on a mixture of essentialist notions on race, gender, and the sociopolitical appears dated, and his idealization of a strangely conceived femininity and the gender order he envisions have been regarded with disgust particularly by most feminists. But female writers have brought their ideas of the order of gender to bear on their writings about ethnic alterity just as much as their male counterparts; and so have those who question simple, binary models of gender: gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Again, we have to recognize that fiction on ethnic alterity is genderized also on the level of the author’s personal identity and the social discourses that shaped it, Latinamericanism among them.10

In a remarkable carryover from the sentimental fiction of the nineteenth century, the role of the teacher and governess appears as a recurring feature in North American fiction on Latin America, notably that written by female authors.11 The failure of the protagonists’ “civilizing” efforts because of the conflict of the discourses of ethnicity and gender is portrayed most brilliantly in the work of the great modernist Katherine Anne Porter. Porter admired Lawrence’s portrayal of the visible Mexico but detested the particular brand of sexism she found in his writing, where the female characters achieve full self-realization only in becoming part of some male-dominated system of society. Look once again at her short story “Flowering Judas” (1930), which I have discussed in Chapter 5 in the context of fictions on the Mexican Revolution: Laura shares the frustration and aimlessness that characterize Lawrence’s protagonist at the beginning of The Plumed Serpent, yet her failure has to be seen not so much as that of a representative of the declining West, but as a personal defeat in view of the discrepancy between high pretensions and insufficient fulfillment, both applying to her personal role as well as to the fate of the revolution. Although she has a freedom of action that goes beyond what was customary for women particularly in Mexican society, much of what she goes through is gender specific. A male character would not feel threatened by a macho society the way Laura does; just as little could a male protagonist be made to appear as betraying his sexual and social role by rejecting all potential partners.

Whereas most literary characters in North American fiction on the southern neighbor seem to have internalized the gendered version of Mexico as the country of desire, whether for sex or power or death, Laura does not, or not any longer, conform to a role model that fits this pattern and that seems to work for millions of tourists and any number of adventurers of both genders: “Nobody touches her, but all praise her gray eyes, and the soft, round under lip which promises gayety, yet is always grave, nearly always firmly closed: and they cannot understand why she is in Mexico” (Collected Stories, 95). However, rather than using her disillusionment for achieving
Gendered Perceptions

the neutral position of an uninvolved observer, Laura finds herself in an intercultural situation where she is, as it were, paralyzed by the conflicting demands of several discursive systems. She can neither reject the Other of the revolution nor become an unquestioning part of it. She can neither assume the superior North American, quasi-masculine role of controlling her personal gender relations nor accept the submissive role of Mexican women according to the national cliché. Because she cannot retire to any form of either-or position, because binary differentiation as a mode of structuring reality is no longer sufficient, because there is no saving hybrid position, either, she remains in a state of painful transdifference. I will come back to this aspect at the end of the chapter.

*interdiscursive gaps appear more* frequently after World War II, in the period of the Cold War, and sometimes make for highly suggestive texts. I return here to Michael Rumaker’s short story “Gringos” (1966), which I have used in my introductory chapter to demonstrate the workings of Latin-Americanism. The story, however, contains a second level of meaning that transforms it from a stereotypical to a deeply ironic text. Set at the historical moment when post–World War II beliefs in US military, economic, politico-institutional, and cultural superiority defending the “Free World” against communism are beginning to be questioned by the Vietnam War, the student rebellion, ethnic and civil rights movements, and the new, Second Wave feminist movement, the story ironically undercuts US superiority beliefs by showing the dead end of a male chauvinist sex and gender discourse in conjunction with an equally dated idea of ethnic-cultural alterity.

What the protagonist, a young American man, whom we later get to know by his first name Jim, encounters in the Mexican border town seems to confirm not only ethnic but also gender stereotypes concerning the foreign country. There is the little boy who exploits his sister, there are the old churchgoing women exploited by the church, there are the shameless gender relations characteristic of a society where everybody can be bought, and they are linked with the physically repulsive. A young Mexican man whom Jim asks for directions flirts with two girls and lets his pants down in front of them; the girls simply giggle. Another urinates into the street. The young *gringo* and Harley, the American sailor, see a woman combing her wet black hair. “Her hair had the shine of a bird’s wing, glossy and rich” (*Gringos*, 51). But when they approach her, this solitary specimen of stereotypical Latin American female allurement immediately lifts her skirt: “The flesh of her legs hung loose and pebbled in the stark afternoon sunlight, the skin greenish and laced with clusters of veins” (51). As in a medieval morality play, we are shown the hideous underside of carnal attractiveness. The discourse of
the Latin American Other is exemplified by the sphere of gender relations. Treacherously alluring females are exploited by macho males, and both cooperate to exploit the visitors from the North, who nonetheless represent a nation whose manifest destiny it is to control and exploit the brown-skinned people, the racially inferior.

However, the intersection of race and gender here also serves to reveal the curious contradictions of discourses of alterity. At first glance Rumaker’s story seems to conform to an American discourse of a gendered Mexico to be penetrated by American men bent on adventures, on escape from whatever restrains or threatens them at home, on sexual wish fulfillment, or on the acquisition of economic gain or political power: in a word, men pursuing a quest for self-realization and thus, identity. The pages of North American fiction by male white authors, whose picture of Latin America is shaped by their own genderized identity construction, are populated by such characters. In our case, the young protagonist is on a walking tour to Mexico City, “walking away from trouble” (44), as he says. The sailor is on furlough and is obviously taking advantage of the superior power he both represents as a member of the US Navy and embodies by his impressive physical strength. What they encounter across the border is a sterile Mexico whose feminine qualities have been reduced to commercialized sexuality, a wasteland rather than a subtropical paradise.

And yet the two Americans themselves appear as reductive forms of American self-perception: dirty, foul-mouthed, and without manners, they can hardly count as representatives of a superior patriarchal civilization. As the title indicates, they deserve the contemptuous Spanish epithet gringo. To make things even more complicated, there are at least hints of a potential interest in homosexuality, though both men articulate their reserve in this matter. Sexual identity appears to be fluid even in a vociferously binary order of genders. Another aspect calling clear divisions into question is the omnipresence of the abject, not only on the Mexican but also on the American side. Jim and Harley repeatedly expectorate, as do the Mexican characters, male and female. An American sailor is lying “in the middle of the road, his cheek resting in a pool of vomit” (38). The hotel bed the two Americans share is covered with “blood and come stains” (44), but Jim does not mind having sex with the same prostitute directly after the sailor: “I don’t mind sloppy seconds” (58). Mexican workers carry sides of bloody, fly-covered meat into a butcher shop, but again the Americans share the physical experience: “Jim and the sailor stopped and watched, Jim idly leaning his shoulder against the rear of the van and staining his shirt with blood” (49). In Kristeva’s definition, the abject—blood, urine, bodily fluids, the unclean—is associated with the maternal body and hence with the permeability of the border between the
female, pre-individuation realm of the semiotic and the male-dominated, identity-establishing order of the symbolic (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*). In this story, the abject unites Mexicans and Americans. Rumaker’s mode of presenting his protagonist only from the outside resembles Hemingway’s method and reminds us of his theory: Most of the iceberg remains under water, that is, for the reader to discover.

What emerges in the reading process is that the encompassing negativity of the world encountered by the *gringos* corresponds to their own negative traits. From here it is easy to see Mexico—abject in a general and also a psychoanalytical sense—as a projection of the protagonist and hence part of himself. In terms of Kristeva’s later study, *Strangers to Ourselves*, we all bear the foreign, nay, the foreigner, within ourselves, as what is strange, disturbing, in Freud’s sense *unheimlich*, uncanny:

> Foreigner: a choked up rage deep down in my throat, a black angel clouding transparency, opaque, unfathomable spur. The image of hatred and of the other, a foreigner is neither the romantic victim of our clannish indolence nor the intruder responsible for all the ills of the polis. Neither the apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of appeasing the group. Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. By recognizing him within ourselves, we are spared detesting him in himself. A symptom that precisely turns “we” into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible. The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities. (Kristeva, *Strangers*, 2)

It is the negation of this foreignness in ourselves that leads to its projection onto the external Other, a projection notably of the abject, the desire, the drive, the uncanny. The moment gender relations come into view not only as an illustration of cultural difference, but in their own problematic instability and as an area of projections, we are dealing with a story not only about two *gringos* in Mexico at a given historical moment, but about universal aspects of intercultural relations. The Mexican setting serves as a catalyst to bring the main character’s nature into the open and functions as a mirror in its reflection of gender trouble. The mutual deconstruction of stereotypical notions of the ethnic Other and of gender binarisms can be overlooked only when we identify too closely with the protagonist’s point of view.

Not all relevant texts of the later twentieth century represent the discursive changes occurring at that time. And although in many popular novels by male writers, a male US American protagonist still represents the patriarchal
order, in women’s fiction this pattern is often modified in a way that is quite familiar from psychoanalytical discussions of Oedipal constellations: the female protagonist attempts to gain the affection of and then tame the macho. Because her national background enables her to carry patriarchal power in her cultural baggage, she finds Latin America a terrain where a complete gender reversal should be possible for herself and provide great satisfaction. Inevitably, however, she has to battle against the machista rudeness and infidelity of her Latin lover in a society where she finds little understanding even from female friends and in-laws. While trying to escape the limitations the gender discourse of her home country has put upon her, she encounters the more archaic gender constructions her Latin American environment has in store.13

Such is the case of the woman nicknamed Rubia (blonde), the first-person narrator of Christine Bell’s popular novel Saint (1985), who manages to come to terms with her unfaithful Latin husband in a kind of disillusioned arrangement, but whose social reform efforts are thwarted by the heat and fertility of the surrounding jungle and the irresponsibility and irrationality of the uneducated local population. Although the female protagonist achieves the quasi-male position of the person in charge of their hacienda, she does not have the clout to enforce her rational, North American views and methods. Unsuccessfully, she tries to combine the roles of the angel in the house and the nurse and teacher that were assigned to women in nineteenth-century Euro-American civilization, two of very few escape routes from the wife-mother role prescribed by her society. What might have developed into a bridge transcending the boundaries of cultures and genders, a Bhabhaian “third space” of successful hybridities, succumbs to tropical nature, a development that seems to reaffirm the age-old association of the feminine with nature, whatever its shortcomings may be:14

If heat had a smell, it would smell like this: layers upon layers of rotting vegetation steaming on the jungle floor. It is not an unpleasant odor by itself. It rises bestial and musklike. But in the hot moist air before the rains come, the jungle tries to cover it like a whore with sickening sweet wafts of frangipani and Spanish jasmine. (Saint, 3)

Rubia cannot achieve the synthesis that Beach’s Hannah Pentecost created; she cannot control what oppresses her by the tokens of feminine, refined civilization:

The air is heavy enough to hold in your hand. It should be cooler inside. The paths from the main gate leading to the stables and the main house are clean and neat. The low kept ground cover appears cool and green. The iced chan-
deliers inside, the open windows and polished wooden floors, the crystal vases and silver tea sets appropriately spaced in the large rooms, the fans droning discreetly in every room, in every corridor—yes, it should be cooler inside. But this is the kind of heat that has substance, that clings and speaks. This is the kind of heat that knows the convoluted corridors of the house as well as it knows the jungle outside. (3–4)

On the contrary, male superiority in its North American version and hence the genderized binary inter-American distribution of power is reestablished when oil is found and the hacienda is turned into a provider of raw material, while the living quarters, the heterotopic site of Rubia’s intercultural reform attempts, are reclaimed by the jungle.

In the United States, the image of Mexico and other Latin American countries is gendered in order to accommodate aspects of the alterity discourse that are basically the same regardless of the author’s gender. This is so even where gender roles and the North American cultural alterity discourse are questioned, namely in such Chicana fiction as contains descriptions of a visit to the homeland.15 Hitherto, with the exception of Gonzales’s El Vago, analyzed in chapter 5, I have not included Mexican American or other Latino texts because they belong to a somewhat different discursive system. However, I will discuss the following two novels because they represent the potential of interdiscursivity to an even higher degree than the ones analyzed before. By representing the foreign within US society and within individual US citizens, these texts provide particularly manifest examples for Kristeva’s anti-xenophobic argument that we are strangers to ourselves.

Both books are road novels, not a rare phenomenon in fictions dealing with visiting Mexico. As Ronald Primeau has shown, road novels can be used to confirm dominant values such as the role of “the individual in a mass-dominated society,” but may also be used to express the new, the emergent16 that “is most often manifest as escape, political protest, or social reform and may be particularly evident in road works by women and ethnic minorities” (Primeau 4, qtd. in Ganser 42). In her excellent study of contemporary road fiction by American women, Roads of Her Own, Alexandra Ganser divides the texts under discussion into three groups: quest novels, novels about “para-nomadic” travelers, and picaresque novels. Obviously, overlappings are possible.

Sheila Ortiz Taylor’s novel Faultline (1982) is the highly humorous story of a lesbian coming out. Because Taylor is a Chicana, one might expect that the return to the ancient land would serve as a catalyzing experience to bring this development about. However, the author uses the Mexican connection
highly ironically. The novel is told from the point of view of a variety of major and minor characters and comprises events of 1959 and 1971–72, with considerable jumping back and forth in time. In 1959 young Arden Benbow, the Californian protagonist, accompanies her partially immobi-
lized Aunt Vi(olet) who is escaping to Mexico from the nursing home where her newly rich husband has put her after she has suffered a stroke. The third in the party is Aunt Vi’s dwarfish orderly Homer Rice, a failed magician, whom Vi calls Maurio Carbonara. Their flight to Mexico is in itself a par-
ody of a pattern well known from (often popular) literature and Hollywood films (Pisarz-Ramírez 338). Arden makes a point of being “Indian” and sometimes reflects on what that may mean; in a “Character Reference” by an official, we get the following information: “It seemed her grandmother’s maiden name was Benbow, that she was an Indian from somewhere in the northwest” (Faultline, 29). Thus, Arden seems to have neither Mexican connections nor any specific cultural knowledge of the country, but this is of no importance because the Mexico the travelers encounter seems to be a holiday extension of the United States, a theme park prepared by the tourist industry.

Their first stop is a campground and trailer park on the Pacific coast near Guaymas that is run by Ruby, an elderly former stripper from Los Angeles who has found her subtropical dream-space here and runs it with the help of a Mexican employee, a place straight out of Tennessee Williams’s The Night of the Iguana, and of course entirely dependent on US tourists. Here they are joined by Michael Raven, the private eye Aunt Vi’s husband has sent after them. Michael also follows them to Guanajuato, where they stay for a month in an old Spanish castle that has been transformed into a luxury hotel. Like the catacombs of Guanajuato, with their well-known collection of naturally mummified bodies of cholera victims, the hotel is primarily an attraction to American tourists. Rather than being horrified by the distorted bodies, as had been the case with science fiction writer Ray Bradbury when he visited the catacombs (Bradbury xvii), Taylor’s characters turn their visit to the site into a grotesquerie when Michael, who is ill, sways, grazes one of the pyramids of skulls, and makes it collapse: “The schoolteachers broke into a run, the guide screaming high-pitched directions. I grabbed Aunt Vi and Maurio grabbed Michael. We dragged them back, while three million skulls broke loose, bounding, crashing, and rolling down, thundering like the devil’s own bowling alley” (Faultline, 73). Taylor thus deconstructs the US American discourse on the Mexican Other either by over-conformity or by burlesquing its most sinister element, the omnipresence of the theme of death.

Sure enough, the avalanche of skulls affects all four travelers, but their self-finding transformations are by no means consistent. Aunt Vi finds suffi-
cient new energy to all but finish the gothic romance *Secret of the Skulls* she is writing. Her death while sitting in bed, writing, is her rather undramatic version of the death-in-Mexico motif. Arden, encouraged by her aunt, finds that she is a poet herself, and by writing the finishing three pages of Vi’s novel, a prose writer as well. Michael and Homer/Maurio, failed detective and magician, respectively, discover their love and make a public announcement of their gay relationship. But the main character, Arden, counteracts the border-transcending tendency of their Mexican experience by giving in to her fellow student Malthus’s request that she marry him. Malthus, who has also followed her to Mexico, “with a love as tenacious as poison ivy” (77), makes her give up her literary career. Instead, they have six children, and it takes the major earthquake suggested by the title, the San Fernando quake of 1971, to throw her off her tracks and into the arms of Alice, the wife of Malthus’s colleague and superior. True, she had fallen in love with Ruby twelve years before, but that had remained in the range of a tender and appreciative affection. Thus, it is the tectonic structure of the Americas and not the trip to Mexico that brings about Arden’s lesbian coming out.

The term *faultline* has other implications as well. It refers to the line dividing fault from non-fault, a fuzzy line, indeed, as a number of incidents in the novel reveal. It is only by proving that there is nothing wrong with being a lesbian and a mother raising six children that Arden can win the custody struggle with Malthus and thus bring about the plural happy endings of the book’s conclusion. Gabriele Pisarz-Ramírez argues that

Ortiz Taylor’s Mexico emerges as a place of freedom, a space of spiritual and personal recreation, where identities become fluid and are open for refashioning [. . . ,] a symbolic backdrop against which a spiritual quest or cleansing is played out [. . . ,] a place where the exclusionary patriarchal logics which [. . .] are shown to be oppressive for Arden and her aunt Vi in the U.S., seem to be suspended. (337)

This observation has to be qualified, however. If, in the terms used by Gan- ser, *Faultline*, in its on-the-road parts, is a quest novel, the quests pursued by the individual characters are more often acts of chance, and the role of Mexico is fulfilled only in a comic confusion of directions and a debunking of clichés. Taylor pokes fun at the conventional Mexico discourse, but also at an equally essentialist discourse on gender and sexual orientation. It is in the strongest and in a sense most poetic passages of the book that this soft undermining of essentialism finds its best expression. In a scene also analyzed by Pisarz-Ramírez, Arden “reassembles an old motorcycle and muses about its possible re-conceptualization from an aggressive symbol of performed maleness into a vehicle for harmony and spirituality” (Pisarz-Ramírez 337).
You are upset about the motorcycle. Or maybe motorcycles in general upset you, and the thought of a woman on a motorcycle, especially when she is not a mannequin passenger, drives you wild. Step to the rear of the bike, please.

Well, part of your problem is that you are thinking about men on motorcycles. You are thinking of arrogant noise and sideways leers through tinted face shields. You are thinking of sprawling legs and phallic innuendo.

Motorcycles do not need to be noisy. They can hum. The hum means they are well cared for and do not require your attention. And the rider does not require your attention. The rider’s attention is elsewhere.

The rider is watching for wild flowers. She is feeling the ripple of asphalt, feeling for the bank of a curve, listening for the bird call or the thunk of a manhole cover. She is with things, as things. She is reaching, at odd moments, for what they stand for. Between her and the wind there is nothing but her own calm mind. (Faultline, 66)
and postcolonial discussions of the role of the subject as moving through space and transcending boundaries. Rosi Braidotti in *Nomadic Subjects* and other critics have added a feminist perspective. A definition like that offered by Richard Osborne in his *Megawords: 200 Terms You Really Need to Know* points to its attractiveness but also reveals its distortions: “To be a nomadic subject is to be homeless, to exist in an imaginary and symbolic realm that subverts the accepted definitions of what is and replaces them with categories of fluidity and possibility” (195, qtd. in Ganser 165). The dire necessities of the life of true nomads, their marginalization in many geographical areas and nation states, is far from being just imaginary and symbolic, and therefore Ganser correctly introduces the neologism “para-nomadic”: “In order to distinguish a more metaphorical nomadism from traditional nomads, *para-nomadism* might be a better terminological choice than neo-nomadism, expressing a ‘close-to’ relation between figural and actual nomads rather than echoing a questionable evolutionary development” (179). For a study of women’s road novels, the term has specific attractions:

From a strictly epistemological perspective, feminist para-nomads should be of interest not because they are supposedly free-roaming warriors, but because nomadism, even when characterized by a mobility that is premeditated, strained, or challenged, implicitly resists traditional Western binary structures such as departure and arrival, movement and rest, central and marginal, or public and private spaces. [. . .] Epistemological para-nomadism therefore offers to dismantle binary structures of center and margin in both a postcolonial and feminist context without denying the existence of a center altogether. [. . .] According to this reformulation of the nomadic as para-nomadism, the protagonists of the road stories in the following [Ganser’s] analyses embody the opposite of the vanguards of freedom of mobility and the adventurous traveler: they are forced onto the road by external (economic) coercion, which frequently translates, by way of its discursive inscription onto the body, into internal pressures. (179–80)

In the case of *The Mixquiahuala Letters*, though, the characters’ nomadism is not due to external pressure but to an internal desire to test one’s limits, to explore the exotic and the erotic in a series of efforts to find sexual fulfillment, satisfying relationships, detachment from home, and a new home that may turn out to be some kind of ancestral belonging. Mexico serves as a catalyst and helps the protagonists to find their roles, their perspectives on life, society, love, and personal relations. In the case of the letter writer, Teresa, who travels to Mexico more often, a complex and fluid perception of the country is achieved. Her friend Alicia, on the contrary, experiences the Mexico of her two visits as a much more dominantly hostile testing ground. For both, nation and culture are encountered almost exclusively in the shape
of the Mexican men they meet and who fulfill all US clichés of either aggressive or romantic sexism. While debunking idealizing Chicano notions about Mexico, the novel also confirms US stereotypes. This is not too surprising given the fact that the two women travel as backpacking gringa tourists, therefore evoking reverse clichés held by the Mexicans. The novel seems to be playing with several varieties of (para-)nomadism and simultaneously contains a strong element of the quest narrative. In this process, center and margin turn out to be fluctuating and potentially interchangeable.

The Mixquiahuala Letters is the story of the relationship between two young US American women, Teresa and Alicia, over a period of roughly ten years, beginning when they are both around twenty years old. It is told in a series of forty letters—some of them in the form of poems—from Teresa to Alicia and thus returns to the old model of the epistolary novel that was so fashionable in eighteenth-century sentimental fiction, particularly among female writers. However, because we do not get Alicia’s answers, not even by implication, and because Teresa’s letters tell the story of the women’s friendship, focusing on their joint travels to Mexico, events that are well known to the recipient, we may wonder if these letters may not be directed primarily at the sender herself. Some of the letters are not even signed and may never have been sent at all. They are not dated but apparently have been written at different times. What makes matters even more disturbing is that their sequence in the book does not correspond to the chronology we may—perhaps—deduce from the content. Instead, the author begins by addressing the reader:

Dear Reader:

It is the author’s duty to alert the reader that this is not a book to be read in the usual sequence. All letters are numbered to aid in following any one of the author’s proposed options. (Mixquiahuala, 7)

This is followed by three different lists of chapters, one “FOR THE CONFORMIST,” one “FOR THE CYNIC,” and the third “FOR THE QUIXOTIC” (7–9). None of these proposed sequences for reading contains all letters as they appear in the book, where they are printed in the numerical order 1–40. The author ends this disconcerting prologue by commenting, “For the reader committed to nothing but short fiction, all the letters read as separate entities. Good luck whichever journey you choose!” (9). In case this postmodern procedure of letting the readers assemble their own versions of the text should remind some of Julio Cortázar’s Hopscotch (Rayuela), the book bears the dedication “In memory of the master of the game, Julio Cortázar” (6). Whether this dedication to the great Argentine novelist is respectful or
Gendered Perceptions

ironic, this being a book casting doubt on patriarchal master discourses, remains anybody’s guess (cf. Gonzales-Berry 115). Any reading sequence, though, will produce basically the same impression: the relations of women and men are doomed to end in disappointment or even disaster.19

Assuming that the novel contains some autobiographical material, the decade covered roughly corresponds to that between the early 1970s and early 1980s.20 In Letter 9 we learn that Teresa’s husband Libra goes to California at the period of the last flower children. He is joined in San Francisco by Teresa, who works in the Women’s Liberation movement and the Chicano movement. In the poem forming Letter 10, she speaks of “our Aztlán period” (38), referring to the mythical homeland Aztlán celebrated by the movement, and also gives the years 1974 and 1976 as temporal orientation points. But politics play hardly any explicit role in this book. In Mexico, the friends are at one point suspected of having been involved in the assassination attempt against a presidential candidate, but the political background is never explained, nor are recent dramatic events such as the 1968 Tlatelolco student massacre in Mexico City even mentioned. Apart from the brief treatment of women’s lib and the Chicano movement, the political situation in the United States remains equally obscure. That Alicia’s lover Abdel, whose death is the main topic of Letter 40, is a traumatized Vietnam veteran may be seen as an indirect comment on the war, but it is Alicia’s relationship with him, and his suicide as a final act of vengeance for Alicia’s unwillingness or incapability to lend him the emotional support he needs, that is at the center of this letter. As always, Teresa also comments on her friend’s behavior, culminating in her empathetically assuming Alicia’s voice in the last lines of the book:

I DIDN’T KNOW YOU

HAD A GUN! I DIDN’T . . . KNOW . . . !

MOTHER OF GOD, HELP!

TERESA . . . ? ABDEL, YOU SON OF A BITCH!

Motherfucker, why didn’t you just leave? (132)21

This is the last instance of the battle of the sexes that makes up most of the content of the book. Teresa and Alicia’s friendship defines itself as a mental and emotional grappling with one another’s relationships with men because both women define themselves through such relationships. Their discussions, as they are presented by Teresa, thus fill the whole range from closeness and deep understanding to disgust, detachment, or jealousy. If the decade described eclectically in this epistolary series can be seen as the formative period of both women—Teresa finds her role as a poet, Alicia hers as an artist—their art never takes center stage. If we are to judge from those letters
presented as poems, Teresa’s poetry is focused on gender relations; it even includes a dramatic monologue by one of her lovers who has jilted her, a kind of poetic getting-even. Alicia’s work is also centered around the gender roles of women. Teresa sees Alicia’s mixed-media series La casita consisting of “angry dolls made of papièr maché [sic] with hair from your own head” (118) as an expression of Alicia’s anger. As the Spanish title of the series indicates, the artist has had her Mexican experiences in mind. However, Teresa explains her own lack of tears by the fact that they are beyond all this now: “There were no tears. They dried with the remains of the fetus that had ended far away from oceans, casitas, dreams and follies of gringas and suave Latin lovers. It’s past. The exorcism of the artist’s rite serves only as a reminder” (118). What she refers to here is the fact that both women have had abortions. Teresa aborted a child in her twenties when she tried to keep her Spanish lover Alexis. He, however, was horrified when she told him, after which they broke up. Alicia had an abortion at age seventeen, her black lover Rodney not caring to take the responsibility for a baby. She could get access to the clinic only by using the papers of a Puerto Rican friend, a mistaken identity that leads to her (nonconsensual) sterilization, not an uncommon procedure at American hospitals of that time with respect to ethnic minorities.

In both cases, the absolutely traumatizing experience is to be seen in an ironic inter-American context: Teresa tried to hold on to her Spanish lover, acting against her Mexican Amerindian heritage that made her hate white men and women. Alicia, who has had a WASP upbringing and whose own Spanish, part-gypsy ancestors are denied by her family, undergoes the treatment intended for Latin American nonwhites. Thus, these experiences are chiastically arranged. In each case, they have left the deepest wounds in the women’s emotional life.

Their friendship, which Teresa calls a “love affair” in the sense of “an expression of nostalgia and melancholy for the depth of our empathy” (39), never turns into a lesbian relationship, but they are aware of each other’s physical qualities. In a poem in Letter 11, Teresa tells how she watched Alicia getting a massage, which is turned into lovemaking by the masseur:

\[
\text{the elastic waistband of your panties} \\
\text{pushed down over the swollen profusion} \\
\text{of your buttocks} \\
\text{with the help of his confident hands} \\
[. . .] \\
\text{i closed my eyes} \\
\text{went on} \\
\text{with my nap} \ (40)
\]
Voyeurism does not develop into involvement. Their mutual awareness changes from situation to situation, but it is when cultural contexts come into play that Teresa realizes that bodies are socially, discursively constructed. During their first stay in Mexico, as students “at a North American institution in Mexico City” (18) whose instructors do not speak Spanish, they live in a boarding house, where

our hostesses giggled and fluttered attentively and with nervous apprehension about their latest American guests.

Didn’t they tell anything by my Indian-marked face, fluent use of the language, undeniably Spanish name? Nothing blurred their vision of another gringa come to stay as i nodded and shook hands during introductions and took my seat. (18–19)

Teresa is disappointed about not being recognized as belonging to the Mexican people. On the other hand, their Mexican teacher in copperwork, who is “enraptured” (20) by the blond American female students, doesn’t like her because she is not gringa enough:

i, with dark hair and Asian eyes, must’ve appeared like the daughter of a migrant worker or a laborer in the North (which of course, i was). i was nothing so close to godliness as fair-skinned or wealthy or even a simple gringa with a birthright ticket to upward mobility in the land paved with gold, but the daughter of someone like him, except that he’d made the wade to the other side. (21)

Thus, skin color is a matter of class rather than race, but in situations of competition it will be a distinctive feature. In the poem making up Letter 13, Teresa confesses, “Alicia, why i hated white women and sometimes didn’t like you:/ Society had made them above all possessions/ the most desired” (43). She hates white women even more when they prefer dark, southern lovers and thus avail themselves of a sexuality that is superior to that of WASP men. In this context rife with ethnic stereotypes, she can see Alicia only as unattractive: “Meanwhile, you were flat-chested, not especially pretty and/ bore no resemblance to the ideal of any man/ you encountered anywhere” (44). However, in the very next letter, Teresa enters another discursive field, that of feminine solidarity, and beyond that writes as an intimate friend who can praise Alicia’s beauty: “i wish i could have convinced you how beautiful you are, then perhaps you might not’ve gone through so much personal agony during that second journey to Mexico” (45), and she goes on to describe in loving detail Alicia’s hair, her long legs, her small breasts, her neck, her fingers. In a way, Teresa presents an early exemplification of Judith Butler’s theory of the discursive performativity of sex and body:
To “concede” the undeniability of “sex” or its “materiality” is always to concede some version of “sex,” some formation of “materiality.” Is the discourse in and through which that concession occurs—and, yes, that concession invariably does occur—not itself formative of the very phenomenon that it concedes? To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. In this sense, the linguistic capacity to refer to sexed bodies is not denied, but the very meaning of “referentiality” is altered. In philosophical terms, the constative claim is always to some degree performative. (Butler 10–11)

This discursive formation of the body extends beyond the sexual characteristics to the individual’s contextual appearance. Alicia pointedly “said i’d acquired the body most desirable to men of the region” (Mixquiahuala, 56), but Teresa goes on eating rich food and gaining weight, whereas Alicia eats “with a greater appetite, and found it difficult to keep up [her] weight,” demonstrating her inability to conform to the local norms. Teresa’s comment “Having the choice, i’d prefer [your metabolism]” (56) is an ingenuous acknowledgement of the limits of individual choice. This amounts to a racial identification, an attempt to accept her ethnic heritage as fundamentally positive. Although Butler warns us of a conflation of racism and sexism as analogical systems of power exertion (18), in The Mixquiahuala Letters both work hand in hand, and the same applies to what one might call inverted racism and sexism, the willful identification with a group considered as one’s own.

Teresa acknowledges the dominance of the discursive over the individual when she writes, “Destiny is not a metaphysical confrontation with one’s self, rather, society has knit its pattern so tight that a confrontation with it is inevitable” (59). This confrontation will end in submission or, rather, in her case there has been some conformity with the discursive order all along. To a certain extent, Teresa can follow the motto “When in Mexico do as the Mexicans do,” whereas Alicia will not accept this order. Hence her “agony,” the series of futile attempts to find love for herself as an individual. What she encounters instead is a series of men who, if they are interested in her at all, try to have sex with her as a sign of their victory, as the conquest of a white woman, an interethnic getting-even and a national Mexican backlash against Yankee supremacy. That Alicia cannot be part of the national ritual game of love is made symbolically clear when she arrives in a town where she is to meet Teresa and, looking for her, walks the evening paseo around the square in the same direction as the men rather than the opposite one of the women, thus becoming an object of ridicule.

The two women’s “gender trouble” begins at home, but it is a race, class,
and gender trouble. Teresa, who grew up in Chicago, thinks “of the city i’d been brought up in, where dark skin and a humble background had subjected me to atrocities” (61–62). Her early marriage out of love goes to pieces because of poverty or else because of her new feminist insight: “i’d left him because i thought i was fighting a society in which men and women entangled their relationships with untruths” (127). In Mexico, Teresa believes, the children she would have “wouldn’t suffer at the hands of the ignorant, but would be raised in a land where copper-colored flesh was the norm” (62). She accepts the marriage proposal of Sergio, a rich entrepreneur in Yucatán, and is ready to divorce Libra, although she is not in love with her suitor, because she tries to accept the Mexican social and gender discourse: “What did love have to do with the order of things? A woman didn’t marry for love in that part of the world. She married out of necessity,” because this was “the only door opened to me to escape the banal destiny planned from birth” (62). And yet she is deeply hurt when Sergio lets her know that he was never quite serious, and thus reveals her own inconsistencies.

If Sergio represents one example of Mexican *machismo*, there are many more, but the friends almost ask for such experiences, because they apply the role model of the Women’s Liberation movement in this unlikely context. They see themselves as modern, liberated women not at all adverse to erotic adventures, but insist on their freedom of choice. They posit a universal, egalitarian gender order and will not come to terms with the more archaic Mexican order dividing women into virgins, married women, and, on the other hand, tramps, a category in which they are put not only by the men they meet but also by the bourgeois ladies in whose houses they happen to stay (and overstay their welcome). The asset of the *gringa* soon loses out to the blemish of the unattached or separated nomadic woman:

> How revolting we were, susceptible to ridicule, abuse, disrespect. We would have hoped for respect as human beings, but the only respect granted a woman is that which a gentleman bestows upon the lady. Clearly, we were no ladies.

> What was our greatest transgression? We traveled alone. (59)

The list of men runs the gamut from the friendly engineers who invite them to live in their house (an invitation they accept, being short of cash) and will not exert too much pressure to go to bed with them; to the engineers’ “bosses,” who take them back to the capital in their limousine, expecting sexual favors; to the would-be rapist Alicia escapes only by Teresa’s desperate intervention; to the transvestites whose drag queen Miss America competition they watch naively, Alicia even more naively letting herself be dragged to the dance floor, dancing being her form of bodily self-abandon; and finally to the ghost-like force of evil that visits them one night and can be stopped only by
Teresa’s prayers. Having inherited her grandmother’s superstition, she is better equipped than secularized Alicia to cope with the spiritual side of the country, although she remembers Catholicism as utterly oppressive.

They blame society: “i’d had enough of the country where relationships were never clear and straightforward but a tangle of contradictions and hypocrisies” (54), but for much the same reason Teresa had left her American marriage. They visit and revisit Mexico as a land of—primarily sexual—adventure and thus also of the (para-)nomadic freedom of choice, whether of places or people. The country is later epitomized in their memories by a series of sometimes attractive but almost always disappointing men, but it is also their own contradictions, their confusion of freedom with the safe passage of tourists, their backpacking brazeness with the expectation that everybody should respect their inviolability not only as gringas but also as independent women, that let their travels, particularly the second trip, develop into a nightmare for which they blame the Mexicans but might also blame themselves.

WASPish Alicia is less willing to accept this order of things, whereas Teresa has at least an inkling of her own inconsistencies and manages to turn her divided experiences into a new order. She revisits her estranged husband and with him conceives a baby boy, Vittorio, with whom she returns to Mexico. Not to the idyllic, rural Mexico she had envisioned in a dream where she felt she belonged: “i was of that mixed blood, of fire and stone, timber and vine” (95–96); but at least to Cuernavaca, the city of international schools and universities, where she, and possibly also her husband, can teach:

We’re going home, Vittorio and i. Are you surprised?

In Cuernavaca, Vittorio’s grandfather will take naps with him in the garden on the hammock tied to two tamarind trees. He will tell him stories he never told me. Mami will call him “hijo,” rolling a warm tortilla sprinkled with salt and wrapping his little fingers around it.

My husband will be gone for hours on end. i’ll read over students’ assignments, eyeglasses hooked on the nose, feet propped up to pamper legs that threaten an outburst of varicose veins. (119)

This self-ironic letter, which can be read as a farewell to Alicia because the latter might never condone this lowering of their standards of independence, marks the temporary end of Teresa’s nomadic wanderings, because she is also a quester having found what she considers her birthright.22 In Letter 26 she celebrates Mexico City:

Mexico City, revisited time and again since childhood, over and again as a woman. I sometimes saw the ancient Tenochtitlán, home of my mother, grandmothers, and greatmother, as an em-
bracing bosom, to welcome me back and rock my weary body and mind to
sleep in its tumultuous, over populated, throbbing, ever pulsating heart. (92)\(^2\)

However, this mythical model of the maternal remains isolated. Hardly ever
does Teresa mention encounters with other women. Beyond the suspicious
mothers of momentary male friends and the rural “women washing clothes
in public basins (a kind of laundromat without machines)” (48), there are no
Mexican female characters, and Teresa’s cynical remark about the reduction
of women to washing machines does not reveal an active engagement with
the role of women in that country, let alone any effort to spread the gospel
of women’s liberation.

If on their second trip, in Teresa’s alliterative, poetic words, “[m]onths of
miles of moving continuously away from the familiar had worked their evil
on our minds and emotions” (69), one may wonder if this evil comes only
from outside. In retrospect, Alicia feels “it all had to have meant something,
that, if we were able to analyze, it would be pertinent, not just to benefit our
lives, but womanhood” (47), but her own positive and negative exoticism,
her analogizing of Mexican *machismo* with Mexican alienity precludes the
development of anything but binary positions. Tellingly, for all we know, she
does not return to Mexico.

Teresa, on the other hand, not only embodies everybody’s inner alienity
and uncanniness that Kristeva has analyzed in *Strangers to Ourselves*, but
the social, cultural, and psychological heritage of two nations. Simultane-
ously colonized and colonizer, she is in harmony and at odds with both
spheres of her experience and, to boot, with the reductive because sexist
straddling position of the (male) Chicano movement. She is simultaneously
independent and family woman, American and Mexican, intellectual and
rooted in nature. That is, she has arrived at a position of transdifference.
Her way of coping with this situation is less an intellectual analysis than an
open-ended search for her splintered self in the open, explorative, sometimes
contradictory structure of the book she writes. Its very form indicates that
there is no final stability, no final role to be achieved. In this she represents
Castillo’s idea of a *Xicanisma*, a Chicana feminism differing both from the
male Chicano *movimiento*, with its indebtedness to Marxism and Catholic-
icism, and from white feminism with its Anglo-bourgeois roots, a Chicana
feminism that involves a return to the, in her mind, prepatriarchal world of
indigenous, notably Aztec, Mexico.

It should be mentioned, however, that Teresa’s identity construction does
not correspond to the picture of the Mexican Other developed in this novel,
a Mexico that, as Pisarz-Ramírez critically remarks, “assumes the form of a
monolithic other: exotic, backward, *machista*, and fixed in the past” (336).
The intersection of the discourses of gender and ethnic alterity need not work toward emancipation, openness, and fluidity in both discursive directions. The relationship of identity and alterity will often be quite asymmetrical, on the individual as on the national and cultural level. The reification of Mexican cultural and gender conditions and the rebellion against the gender relations there formulated in this novel takes Castillo back to older and more essentialist forms of feminism.

As I have already indicated, transdifference both on the experiential and on the descriptive level is a particularly frequent phenomenon where discourses interact and overlap, as is the case in the mutual application of the semantic fields of gender and ethnic identity and alterity. Consequently, some of the subject positions in the texts I have analyzed and the reading experiences they produce can best be classified as transdifferent. For instance, in Porter’s “Flowering Judas,” Laura’s situation between two worlds defined by ethnic and gender boundaries is one of transdifference. Porter’s story, and, in some way, each of the others I have mentioned, affirms differences between North America and Latin America as well as between women and men, although these differences need not be seen as those of essential, “natural” conditions but are discursive constructions of reality. But the intersection of the two sets of differentiation results in experiences, subject positions, or at least reading experiences that resist any construction of meaning based on an exclusionary and conclusive binary model. And this, exactly, is what the term \textit{transdifference} refers to. The very irresolution of the texts I have talked about—in terms of emotional experience as of plot fulfillment—shows that transdifference does not mean synthesis, an overcoming of difference. It does not mean hybridity, either, because in no case is there a continuous and, in Bhabha’s sense, open-ended deconstruction of difference, nor, in a more popular version of the term, a dynamic merging of opposites. Transdifference presupposes difference as a given, as not going away. Situations and experiences of transdifference are uncomfortable, yet intellectually and emotionally suggestive. Although transdifference in itself does not carry a subversive connotation, at the interface of gender and ethnicity, such situations and experiences can be used to move beyond the binarisms that have too long stratified the fictions and discourses of the Other with stereotypical encrustations.