POST-VIETNAM AND TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY CANADIAN VISITORS

for reading north depends on south, and south, north: the idea of here discovers there . . .
—W. H. New, Touching Ecuador (74)

with Margaret Atwood and Graeme Gibson we return to the publication period of the late 1970s to the early 1990s that produced so many interesting US American books on Latin America. Here, again, Vietnam is in the background, and the social changes and conflicts at home—and this now includes Canada—play a significant role. Gender problems are central for Atwood’s Bodily Harm (1981). Questions of gender and sexual orientation will resurface in the novels discussed in the second part of this chapter, but now with points of reference bringing us up to our own, contemporary moment in history. It will be interesting to see if and how the Other and the discourse concerning it have changed, too.

If Canada in Under the Volcano is only a faint echo, a place of imaginary escape, the case is different with another chef-d’oeuvre, Margaret Atwood’s powerful novel Bodily Harm. Here, Canada, Canadian life and perspectives are constantly present even in the foreign place where the protagonist tries to overcome her domestic traumata. Here, too, the inter-American plot pattern is rather simple: Rennie, a lifestyle journalist from Toronto, has several traumatic experiences, among them a partial mastectomy, the collapse of her love relationship, and her unsuccessful affair with her physician. She escapes to a fictitious Caribbean island state, where she wants to write a piece of travel journalism and hopes to recover emotionally. She has an affair with Paul, an American contraband runner, who helps her overcome her detachment from her own body. Mainly through Paul’s ex-mistress Lora, she gets involved in the violent politics of the country and an aborted uprising against the repressive regime. She is arrested and from her cell witnesses the torture of members of the opposition and the brutal beating of Lora, whom
she then nurses and comforts. What Rennie has learned is the interconnectedness of all sufferers; she is capable of putting her own woes into perspective. The open ending describes her possible release through the intercession of the Canadian Embassy, but, alternatively, she may never get out.

In part, the book is a feminist critique of patriarchal society, but Atwood transcends this level by making Rennie herself part of a culture of superficialities, a culture of narcissism. The picture of modern Canadian society is Atwood at her sardonic best. Her satire includes the well-intentioned but basically uninvolved Canadian policy regarding the Caribbean. An opposition politician Rennie meets on the plane pokes fun at the “sweet Canadians” (Bodily Harm, 29) and their ignorance about the real conditions. Indeed, it turns out that their purely touristy interest is another form of Western imperialist exploitation, less violent than the US American, CIA-managed intervention thematized by Asturias, but structurally not too different. In the final analysis, the oppressed people of that island country are seen as examples of feminine vulnerability and victimization. Thus, difference is represented mainly in terms of gender. Gender relations are a version of the power game, and as such reveal great similarities between the Caribbean and Canada—the Other is a mirror image of the self, and there is no escape from this very self. Fruitful reflections must take their start from this sobering insight.

Most critics have seen the novel as in line with other, earlier Atwood texts, such as Life Before Man or Surfacing, that is, as “Another Symbolic Descent” (Carrington), the story of a young urban woman trying to find or redefine her identity in the context of contemporary Canadian society. As in those other texts, the deep structure underlying the surface of consumerism and all-too-flippant interpersonal relations is the gender discourse defining the continuing asymmetrical binary relationship between men who, however “enlightened” and “emancipated” from traditional gender roles they may consider themselves, are nonetheless the heirs of patriarchalism, and women who will play modern variants of their inherited role of the comparatively less powerful. The motto from John Berger’s Ways of Seeing that the author has put above the text seems to confirm this reading: “A man’s presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you. By contrast, a woman’s presence . . . defines what can and cannot be done to her” (Atwood, Bodily Harm, 7). As in, for instance, Atwood’s novel Surfacing or her writings on the position of Canadian culture and society vis-à-vis external pressure, Bodily Harm also addresses the question of the accomplicity or at least co-responsibility of the victims, their sustaining role in the system that seems to control them. The emphasis on gender relations turns the novel into a demonstration of universal structures of human, societal behavior and brings the question of cultural, Latin American alterity into the context
of intergender alterity that might diminish the international aspects of the question of the Other. It will remain to be seen what relevance the theme of the cultural Other has, after all.

It is one of Atwood’s great achievements that characters and events are and remain believable, although she doesn’t aim at complex characterizations and although so many elements are symbolic or satiric abstractions. “The meaning of ‘Renata,’ ‘born again,’ and perhaps even of ‘Wilford,’ ‘will ford’ or ‘will cross over,’ suggests the symbolic significance of [. . .] questions about identity: this is the beginning of an inner journey” (Carrington 49), and this observation can be applied to symbolic elements that have been amply analyzed by critics: motif chains such as hands or touch, cameras and eyes; or symbols such as ropes and chains; verbal ambiguities such as (prison and cancer) cells.

Rennie Wilford is a lifestyle journalist living in Toronto with her partner Jake, a packaging specialist, with whom she has a relaxed, rather superficial relationship whose erotic side is enlivened by the slightly sadomasochistic games Jake likes to play with her. This relationship cannot survive the partial mastectomy Rennie has to undergo after breast cancer has been discovered. Their shared attention to surfaces is shattered, and Rennie feels dissociated from her body. She falls in love with her surgeon Daniel, her savior for the time being, whom she tries rather unsuccessfully to entangle in a love affair. When Rennie returns home and finds two rather macho police officers sitting in her kitchen and is informed that an unknown man has climbed into her apartment and waited for her before he was disturbed and got away, leaving a coil of rope on her bed, she is ready for a vacation in some tropical paradise. She gets an assignment to write a travel piece on the Caribbean island state of St. Antoine and St. Agathe. Here she has an affair with Paul, an American drug runner, gets to know Lora, Paul’s former mistress and now the lover of Prince, an evangelical candidate for the office of prime minister. Another such candidate is Dr. Minnow, whom Rennie has met on the plane and who tries to make her write not about her touristy surface impressions, but about the political corruption under the government of Prime Minister Ellis. Ellis is said to appropriate much of the foreign aid for himself and his underlings while exploiting the population, all the while relying on a US Cold War interest in his strategically positioned country between Cuba and Grenada.

When the people realize that Ellis has rig­ged the elections and try to overthrow his regime, he quells the revolution by armed force. In the course of these events, Prince and Minnow get killed, and Rennie, who is suspected of involvement in the uprising, is incarcerated with Lora under horrible conditions in a cell in the old British fort. This is, as we learn only at the end, where the two women tell their respective life stories to one another, while
the many third-person and present-tense passages serve to relate Rennie’s current experiences, also using her as the focalizing character. At the end, after the two women have witnessed the torture of other prisoners, and after Lora has been brutally beaten and may be dying in Rennie’s arms, Rennie imagines herself being saved by the intercession of the Canadian government—an escape, though, that may remain illusionary. However, she has finally reached an awareness of what unites her with suffering mankind and has overcome her psychological detachment from other human beings. In this respect Rennie has been saved, whatever her fate may be.

Less than one-third of the pages are devoted to the women’s Canadian memories, most of them Rennie’s. These include other traumatizing experiences, notably her childhood in the ultraconservative town of Griswold, where her cold and distant grandmother was the dominating person. This woman succeeded in estranging Rennie from her body and making her unable to enjoy more than superficial physical intimacy. Another experience was Rennie’s assignment to write about pornography, in the course of which she had to watch film material at the police department, culminating in a scene where a rat emerges from the vagina of a black woman. Whereas Rennie had thus far been able to ward off the sadistic violence of the material as unreal, here she feels “that a large gap had appeared in what she’d been used to thinking of as reality” (Bodily Harm, 210) and reacts with violent physical nausea. Lora, who is also Canadian but comes from an underclass environment, contributes memories of her stepfather’s cruelty and hints at other encounters that have made her the hard-boiled woman she is.

Critics have emphasized the gender thematics because Rennie’s essential life experiences consist of relationships with men and with the frustrated and petrified women of her family. Her realization of the vulnerability of her female body can also be associated with the expectations society has with regard to women’s physicality. Much attention has also been given to Rennie’s inner rebirth, to her recognition of her role as part of suffering, mortal humanity, and to her overcoming her distance from the Other:

She doesn’t have much time left, for anything. But neither does anyone else. She’s paying attention, that’s all.

She will never be rescued. She has already been rescued. She is not exempt. Instead she is lucky, suddenly, finally, she’s overflowing with luck, it’s this luck holding her up. (301)

However, this does not mean that the Caribbean is simply a set of stage props for the moral issues discussed in this novel: social and, in particular, gender inequality. Indeed, some scholars have described Atwood’s development in the direction of political fiction and have used her revisions to show
how these aspects gained greater prominence and were presented more and more drastically (cf. Patton; Reichenbächer). In one of the best studies of the novel published thus far, Simone Drichel examines its status as a postcolonial text and as a representation of a Levinasian ethics:

[Both ethics and postcolonialism share an interest in the figure of “the other.” However [. . .] the postcolonial other appears incompatible with the ethical other insofar as both “others” conceptually pull in conflicting directions. Where the postcolonial other invokes a certain ontological closure of politicized identity categories, the ethical other demands an opening up of such categories and pushes us beyond essence. (21)]

For Drichel, *Bodily Harm* should not be regarded as a deficient postcolonial text not sufficiently presenting “the ‘voice’ of the Other” (Tiffin 130; Drichel 23). Instead, the novel reflects the murky postcolonial do-goodism of former settler colonies like Canada, whose role is not so much that of the (former) victims of colonialism than of the accomplices of neocolonialism, although they share a common colonial “mother country” with the plantation colonies in the Caribbean. It is precisely the policy of ill-advised foreign aid that Dr. Minnow ridicules in his frequent comments on the “sweet Canadians.” Drichel applies to the novel Sartre’s concept of the gaze as a means of de-subjectifying the Other, that is of turning her or him into an object. She points out that Rennie, victim of the male gaze of Jake, of the stranger who entered her apartment, of various policemen and others, is also a perpetrator: “a male gaze of which Rennie is the object in Canada is replicated in the neocolonial gaze of the tourist that Rennie brings to the islands” (Drichel 27). Rennie, who is trying to regain her subjectivity by becoming “invisible” (*Bodily Harm*, 39) will for this purpose “train” her gaze and particularly her camera on others and the Other, “turning the violent gaze around and claiming the ‘gun’ for [her]self, [. . .] becoming complicit with the violations carried out by the gaze” (Drichel 29). This approach is supported by other “instruments” Rennie brings to bear on the Other: notebook and travel guide and, one might add, the components of the Canadian alterity discourse she is part of, Edward Said’s “textual attitude” (Drichel 30), and that helps her to nostrify whatever she sees.

What saves her—in the metaphorical sense—is the collapse of this scopic regime of subject versus object when from her prison cell she watches the torture of an old deaf and dumb man who had formerly tried to bring her good luck by offering her his touch: “the hurt man’s face is on a level with Rennie’s own, blood pours down it, she knows who it is, the deaf and dumb man, who has a voice but no words, he can see her, she’s been exposed, it’s panic, he wants her to do something, pleading, *Oh please*” (*Bodily Harm*, 39).
As Drichel points out, this scene of mutual looking amounts to an encounter with the real behind the gaze. It is at this point that Rennie becomes part of a Levinasian ethics of acknowledging “an ‘other’ who exceeds my conceptual grasp and therefore calls into question my self-certainty: ‘The other person stands in a relation to me that exceeds my cognitive powers, placing me in question and calling me to justify myself’” (Drichel 44, quoting Critchley, “Deconstruction,” 32). The achievement of the position of being-in-question, as Levinas calls it, requires traumatization, a corporeal and emotional exposition to the demands of the Other through the encounter with the real.

If Rennie’s final vision of her return to Canada should come true, she will write about her experiences: “She will pick her time; then she will report. For the first time in her life, she can’t think of a title” (*Bodily Harm*, 301). She will write about the real. However, we have no way of knowing what she will or would write—unless it would be the novel *Bodily Harm*—and what response she would receive. We do not know if Lora will survive—after all, she is Canadian, too, so why isn’t she present in the rescue fantasy? All that remains of her is a memory, and that bespeaks loss and closeness at the same time: Rennie “can feel the shape of a hand in hers, both of hers, there but not there, like the afterglow of a match that’s gone out. It will always be there now” (300). In all likelihood, though, we have to take Rennie’s fantasized rescue by the Canadian Embassy for what would probably happen, including the diplomatic efforts of hushing up the “incident” of her incarceration. Thus, Atwood manages to turn what may be wish-fulfillment even on the part of the reader into a mini-dystopia.

Even if the climax of the book is what Drichel has described as Rennie’s coming face to face with the Levinasian Other, most of the novel consists of representations of what Rennie sees while she is not yet sufficiently called into question. The decisive events that bring about her rebirth, her reconciliation with her body and her mortality, and, above all, her opening up for the needs of other people, take place in an alien Latin American location. The fictional state of St. Antoine and St. Agathe is apparently vaguely modeled after St. Lucia and St. Vincent. That is, it has a history of changing colonial ownership, but since the eighteenth century it was British until its very recent independence, which may be assumed to have been achieved in the late 1970s like that of the neighboring islands. Rennie’s visit would have to have taken place in 1980—Paul explains the damaged trees by referring to “Allan. […] The hurricane” (98)—Hurricane Allen ravaged that part of the Caribbean in that year. And when the Canadian official who takes Rennie out of the country in her final fantasy comments on the irrationality of local politics and on the need to humor Prime Minister Ellis, he tries to make her promise that she will not make her harrowing experiences public in
order to prevent further political unrest: “entre nous we wouldn’t want another Grenada on our hands” (296). This clearly refers to the bloodless overthrow of dictatorially ruling Grenada prime minister Eric Gairy by Maurice Bishop and his New Jewel Movement in March, 1979. Bishop’s attempts to introduce social reforms and to achieve more political, economic, and cultural independence by establishing balanced relations with the United States and the Soviet Union plus Cuba was regarded with great distrust by the US government that divided the countries in its “backyard” along the lines of Cold War divisions into friends and enemies. Pinpointing the geographical setting of the novel and the approximate date of action helps us realize the political urgency of a text beyond the very limited insight of the traveling protagonist:

I wanted to take somebody from our society where the forefront occupations are your appearance, your furniture, your job, your boyfriend, your health, and the rest of the world is quite a lot further back. And so your planning is, what am I going to do next year and the year after that, and if I stop smoking now, I won’t get cancer in twenty years. That’s not the way people in those countries think, because they can’t afford to. They are thinking what is going to happen tomorrow or next week or how they will get through the immediate time. I wanted to take somebody from our society and put her into that, cause a resonance there. (Atwood qtd. in Ingersoll 227)

Most of Bodily Harm presents Rennie’s tourist or travel writer construction of the Other and her defenses against anything that might call this view into question. That she (and the reader) gets any information about the islands, their history, their current politics, the corrupt government, the role of the CIA and the Cubans, the misplaced foreign aid, the abysmal social conditions, and so forth, is not her merit but Dr. Minnow’s. He teaches by telling and by showing her what he thinks she should see, while she continues to refuse his request to write a report: “I just don’t do that kind of thing. I do lifestyles” (Bodily Harm, 136). That Minnow is later killed by Marsden, the CIA agent provocateur, gives his message the necessary seriousness. To complain about the book’s lack of information and the missing “voice of the Other” (Tiffin 130) is to miss its point. As far as the Latin American Other is concerned, Bodily Harm is a novel about the shortcomings of the tourist view as a new version of imperialism. One of its ironies is that the negative components of this view, that is, sweeping stereotypes of Caribbean corruption, environmental pollution, and the threat of violence, turn out to be exactly true, although many specifics and additional details continue to escape Rennie’s notice and remain absent.

That this is intentional should be obvious from the many details that remain open but that belong to the discursively informed set of stereotypes
often applied to the Caribbean islands or that are present in numerous works of fiction dealing with this area, notably thrillers, a genre with which *Bodily Harm* shares quite a few elements. Thus, Paul, a US American with a presumably traumatizing background as an agricultural adviser in Southeast Asia in the early stages of the Vietnam War, is the man who touches Rennie as she has never been touched before and enables her to reaccept her body; but he is also, or so Lora says, a drug runner and therefore a shady character occupying a strange position between the parties active on the island. There is, indeed, no reliable information concerning Paul nor any of the other characters because there is no authoritative source. Rennie is caught in a net of often conflicting hints, for instance concerning the risks of associating with Paul, Lora, or Minnow. Unlike in most thrillers, these uncertainties are never cleared up.8

Aspects of the Caribbean that escape Rennie’s attention include, for instance, race. She notices there is only one white man on her plane from Barbados. And on St. Antoine, “[s]he’s beginning to feel very white. Their blacks aren’t the same as our blacks, she reminds herself; then sees that what she means by our blacks are hostile ones in the States, whereas our blacks ought to mean this kind. They seem friendly enough” (*Bodily Harm*, 39). For her, they are remote, and by refusing to further consider skin color, she skips the history of African slavery that has made the island population what it is, namely almost completely black. Just before the doctor’s assignment that led to her operation, she “was working on a piece about drain-chain jewellery. You could [. . .] wear [drain chains] on any part of your anatomy: wrists, neck, waist, even ankles, if you wanted the slave-girl effect” (23–24)—this is as “close” as she ever gets to the issue of slavery. She never comments on the fact that the woman from whose vagina the rat was emerging was black, although she will remember the film document at the end when she compares this form of brutality with the torture routines of the police on St. Antoine. Black skin makes her uncomfortable insofar as it makes her stand out and thus prevents her desired “invisibility.”

Another element of strangeness that hardly finds any attention is language. After all, one would expect people to speak some Creole version of English, but Rennie has difficulties understanding them only at the very beginning. When a police officer approaches her because he wants to sell her a ticket for a police benefit dance, she doesn’t understand him:

So they’re only police, not soldiers. Rennie makes this out by reading the ticket, since she hasn’t understood a word he’s said.

“I don’t have the right kind of money,” she says.

“We take anything you got,” he says, grinning at her, and this time she understands him. (36)
Henceforth, she understands perfectly well such utterances that she finds threatening. The form of English spoken on the islands is indicated by slight elements of substandard usage. Most of the time she associates with other foreigners, anyway. The problem of communication isn’t one of language but of cultural codes, and there she has great difficulties. This is made most obvious in the scene with the deaf and dumb man who is trying to make her shake his hand because this means good luck. She does not understand his gestures and his following her; she feels increasingly threatened by what appears totally alien, until Paul shows up and saves the situation, while “she feels both rude and uncharitable” (75). “Alien reaction paranoia,’ says Paul. ‘Because you don’t know what’s dangerous and what isn’t, everything seems dangerous.” (76).

Nature is another aspect that remains alien and, if noticed by Rennie at all, is experienced as increasingly threatening. She has come to the islands in order to “do a good Fun in the Sun” (16) article, and indeed in the patio of the best hotel in town, “there’s a tree covered with red flowers, huge lobed blossoms like gigantic sweet peas; a dozen hummingbirds swarm around them. Below, on the other side of the curving stone wall, the surf crashes against the rocks just as it is supposed to, and a fresh wind blows off the Atlantic” (90). But before, she has discovered a centipede in her sink, “ten inches long at least, with far too many legs, blood-red, and two curved prongs at the back, or is it the front? [ . . . ] It looks venomous” (60). And she has been down to the beach, which turns out to be not “one of the seven jewel-like beaches with clean sparkling iridescent sand advertised in the brochure. It’s narrow and gravelly and dotted with lumps of coagulated oil, soft as chewing gum and tar-coloured. The sewage pipe runs into the sea” (79). When she drives through the forest with Paul, she sees “huge hothouse trees draped with creepers, giant prehistoric ferns, obese plants with rubbery ear-shaped leaves and fruit like warts, like glands” (98).

That is, the elements of alterity Rennie encounters and takes note of—nature, language, touch—appear as dangerous or abject, disgusting. So does the food, from the “airplane sandwich, slightly rancid butter and roast beef, rotting meat” (49) to the “guava jelly, too sweet, dark orange, and of the consistency of ear wax” (62). Fear and disgust are always closely related:

The number of things Rennie thinks ought to happen to her in foreign countries is limited, but the number of things she fears may happen is much larger. She’s not a courageous traveller, though she’s always argued that this makes her a good travel writer. [ . . . ] Someday, if she keeps it up, she’ll find herself beside a cauldron with an important local person offering her a sheep’s eye or the boiled hand of a monkey, and she’ll be unable to refuse. (127)
Yet what are external, alien sources of fear and disgust soon turn out to be aspects of the self. The camp of hurricane refugees in the fort that Dr. Minnow makes her visit, people who have been neglected by the government, has “the smell of bodies, of latrines and lime and decaying food” (125). Soon enough, Rennie will find herself imprisoned in a cell in this very fort together with Lora, and the bucket containing their own urine and feces will smell much worse.

As in Rumaker’s “Gringos,” the discourses of gender and alterity meet in the abject, but the theme is developed much more radically. Reading the first chapters of Julia Kristeva’s<br />

Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection leaves the impression of holding a psychoanalytic tool kit for an analysis of Bodily Harm. The abject as what “does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Powers 4), the breakdown of the internalized Puritan order of Griswold is what bothers Rennie’s system of surfaces. Her distinctions include lifestyles, genders, ethnic alterity, and also class, as becomes apparent when she meets Lora and dislikes her for her underclass manners. Yet Lora, being turned into an object by Rennie’s gaze, reveals some elements of the abject that puts the subject-object distinction and, indeed, that of inside and outside into question:

“You smoke?” says the woman. The fingers holding the cigarette are bitten to the quick, stub-tipped, slightly grubby, the raw skin around the nails nibbled as if mice have been at them, and this both surprises Rennie and repels her slightly. She wouldn’t want to touch this gnawed hand, or have it touch her. She doesn’t like the sight of ravage, damage, the edge between inside and outside blurred like that. (Bodily Harm, 86)

Repeatedly, Rennie has the fear of being turned inside out herself. When “the scar is pulling [. . .] she’s afraid to look down, she’s afraid she’ll see blood, leakage, her stuffing coming out” (22). She tries to keep Lora at a distance, but the end of the novel shows her cradling Lora’s battered face in her lap, a pietà scene, in which Rennie realizes the maternal as closely connected with the abject: “Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (Kristeva, Powers, 10). Going back to the rejected maternal abject means going back behind language, behind the symbolic, behind signification, to what Kristeva calls the semiotic, the chora, the motherly body as a “receptacle” (14). In accepting Lora’s unrecognizable face as that of the Levinasian Other, she identifies the situation with that perverted birth scene of the rat, “something small and grey and wet” (Bodily Harm, 210), coming out of the black woman’s vagina. That is, she identifies with the tortured woman, the tortured animal. And whereas she threw up when she saw that film, she doesn’t now:
Very carefully, this is important, she turns Lora over [. . .]. She hauls Lora over to the dryest corner of the room and sits with her, pulling Lora’s head and shoulders onto her lap. She moves the sticky hair away from the face, which isn’t a face any more, it’s a bruise, blood is still oozing from the cuts, [. . .] the mouth looks like a piece of fruit that’s been run over by a car, pulp, Rennie wants to throw up, it’s no one she recognizes, she has no connection with this, there’s nothing she can do, it’s the face of a stranger, someone without a name, the word Lora has come unhooked and is hovering in the air, apart from this ruin, mess, there’s nothing she can even wipe this face off with, all the cloth in this room is filthy, septic, except her hands, she could lick this face, clean it off with her tongue, that would be the best, that’s what animals did, [. . .] she can’t do it, it will have to do, it’s the face of Lora after all, there’s no such thing as a faceless stranger, every face is someone’s, it has a name.

She’s holding Lora’s left hand, between both of her own, perfectly still, nothing is moving, and yet she knows she is pulling on the hand, as hard as she can, there’s an invisible hole in the air, Lora is on the other side of it and she has to pull her through, she’s gritting her teeth with the effort, she can hear herself, a moaning, it must be her own voice, this is a gift, this is the hardest thing she’s ever done.

She holds the hand, perfectly still, with all her strength. Surely, if she can only try hard enough, something will move and live again, something will get born. (298–99)

In this scene, Rennie is born again, and perhaps Lora, too, when Rennie calls her by her name: “‘Lora,’ she says. The name descends and enters the body, there’s something, a movement; isn’t there?” (299). The encounter with the abject, the identification with the primal birth scene, does not prevent a return to the level of signification, but we learn about the permeability of the border between the semiotic and the symbolic, between the maternal and the patriarchal, between self and Other. It is important to notice that the tortured old man is deaf and dumb, and therefore his appeal to Rennie is without language. However, his gift of the touch of hands is one that will enable Rennie to overcome her disgust of the abject, to accept it as part of herself. “Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego)” (Kristeva, Powers, 15).

It is also important to remember that the abject is not simply to be equated with morality nor with victimhood. If “[t]he abject [. . .] neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts” (Powers, 15), that also functions on the social level: “Corruption is [. . .] the socialized appearance of the abject” (16). The corruption of the island government is what Minnow and Prince resent and try to resist, and it is Lora’s
realization that Prince has been murdered that brings her to her violent, self-destructive confrontation with the prison guards, a scene in which Rennie is helpless but that she has to see—“why isn’t someone covering her eyes?” (Bodily Harm, 293)—and thereby experience the final breakdown of her objectifying gaze. And yet she will remember that what is reflected in the tinted glasses of the policemen is her own face, her own gaze. Her rebirth is not simply a switching to the other side but a realization of her border situation: “We may call [the abject] a border; abjection is above all ambiguity” (Powers, 9).

And Rennie is only at the beginning. After all, Lora is her compatriot; Rennie does not, and does not have to, take care of the Latin American Other unless by her future writing, should she ever get to that. The man who gives her back her body is a US American, not a local person. Rennie remains within the context of North American voices on the Caribbean, and she keeps at a distance from the one local spokesperson who is trying to change her perspective, Dr. Minnow, until it is too late. However, if Atwood succeeds in representing the limitations and perversions of the tourist gaze, she also succeeds in having her protagonist reach the border of her self-other distinctions as related to gender, class, and ethnicity, which might make her capable of writing about the island situation with indignation and compassion but without further nostrification of the Other. The novel shows human suffering in Canada and the Caribbean, in the north mainly as a consequence of a discourse of gender inequality, in the south in the perpetuation of a colonial discourse on the “natural” social and economic inequality between those in power and the majority of the population. Rennie realizes that wherever she is, she has to be “afraid of men because men are frightening, [. . .] there’s no longer a here and a there” (Bodily Harm, 290). What she is beginning to see, however, is that gender inequality is a form of patriarchally generated social inequality and cannot be reduced to nor excused as some kind of male “nature.” Social inequality is a practically universal phenomenon, but its manifestations differ widely, as Atwood’s interview comment quoted earlier insists. When Rennie recognizes her own implication in this system, her own ambiguity, as it were, she may, nay might, yet turn into a model for a better Canadian approach to the southern neighbors. In this sense, she overcomes the half-heartedness discernible in the US novels of the post-Vietnam era of covert warfare discussed in Chapter 8.

Atwood’s achievement in representing the encounter with the Other through the contacts of bodies, through physical fear and desire, through the interplay of power and powerlessness connected with the gaze, is rarely matched in inter-American literature. One other such text is the brilliant
short story “Pancho Villa’s Head” (1986) by Atwood’s partner Graeme Gibson. The nine-page story is set at Palenque in 1972, at a restaurant where a local rancher plays the role of host. His grandiloquent comments on King Edward’s abdication in favor of his love relationship with an American woman cease with the arrival of his nephew, a local police officer who intimidates all of the guests and finally has the young father of a small Indian family at one of the tables arrested and led off. No reason is given, although the officer mentions “guerilleros and hippies” (“Pancho,” 26) and calls his action “solamente una precaución” (27). The whole event is witnessed by a “tourist,” who serves as focalizing figure.

The other characters around are a middle-aged US woman, a young Canadian whose angry remarks about police violence make the others afraid for his—and their own—safety, and the Indian family consisting of the wife, two young daughters and a baby—a harmonious group the others hate to see broken up by the arrest. The tourist’s perception is restricted by his drunkenness and his insufficient command of Spanish that allows him to understand only fragments of what is being spoken. In a lengthy flashback, he remembers his and his wife’s train ride here, during which she mentioned that someone had stolen Pancho Villa’s head and they were disturbed by the noises of lovemaking from the adjacent compartment where a Mexican army officer and his girlfriend spend the ride. The story marvelously conveys the incredibly tense atmosphere, the alienity of the country (Why would anyone steal the head of the revolutionary leader? What is going on at the restaurant?), the fears and desires arising from the situation. The tourist was annoyed but also aroused by the amatory noise on the train that set his imagination going. He now feels faintly attracted by the American woman, and when he creeps into the hotel bed where his wife has been sleeping, he wants sex with her, only to encounter her disgusted refusal.

However, sexual desire, the alternation of attraction and revulsion, is only one strand connecting the impressions of the night. Noises—the small animals in the thatch overhead, the laughter from the table of the Indian family, the quality of voices and articulation (“‘Hippies!’ Coughing the glottal H, a small, derisive explosion” [26]), the presence or absence of music—and sight impressions—“As the rancher shook his head, admiringly, highlights flashed in his eyes. One side of his moustache appeared in meticulous detail, then retreated into shadow” (20)—shape the picture. What is even more impressive are gestures and touch that accompany or sometimes replace spoken communication or expression: the rancher “was pivoting slowly in a frozen shrug; his forearms were raised in front of his body, the palms of his hands upturned, as if to receive an answer” (21), and then he grasps the tourist’s hand as if to enforce his request. Ambivalent gestures between physical ag-
gression and tenderness occur several times. The American woman “tossed her head, rolling her eyes in mock horror at the noise. As the tourist stared at her thin, sharp mouth, the column of her throat, she ran her fingers through her hair, briefly uncovering a delicate ear. He imagined taking the lobe of it gently between his teeth” (22). The climax of such ambivalence is reached when the police captain approaches the Indian family where the mother is breastfeeding her baby.

The policeman didn’t sit, but leaned over the young mother, as if to admire her baby. “Buenas noches,” he said, and then, after a pause—“Señora.” The Indian woman bobbed her head without raising her eyes. Her hair, the colour of gun metal, was drawn with white ribbons into a braid. Puffing lightly, without inhaling, her husband held his cigarette between thumb and forefinger, as if he didn’t hear the insinuating voice.

The officer placed his hand on the baby’s skull, with his fingers around it, as if he were selecting a melon. [. . .] When the Captain turned the tiny head until its face appeared, a moist brown nipple slipped from its mouth. The woman moved to rearrange her blouse, but the policeman brushed her hand aside. “La cena,” he laughed explosively. Supper, don’t interrupt its supper. The tourist desperately wanted a drink but the American had seized his arm, her nails cutting into the flesh beneath his sleeve. (23)

Perhaps better than any other text discussed in this book, this story presents the immediate goings-on, what is gripping, mentally and physically exciting beneath all the clichés, of which there are many: police brutality, the Mexican fascination with death, the silly, excitement-bent behavior of the foreign visitors (“the tourist only stayed in the vague hope that something might happen” [20]), the rancher’s ruminations about the ideal form of love, and so on. The captain’s contempt for the tourists is justified: “‘Your Canadian comes here. His fingernails are dirty, but not from work. His hands are soft like a woman’s’” (28). The visitors do not understand what is going on but experience it as a drama that conforms to their stereotypes. However, beyond all that appears as stereotypically alien, there is the revelation that human behavior follows certain patterns, no matter how remote the participants of a constellation may appear from one another. The gaze can be reversed and is reversed. Deep structures are revealed in the spontaneous emotions expressed by gestures more than by words, and by sense impressions not yet sufficiently filtered by cultural predispositions. The mystery of Pancho Villa’s head seems to point in the direction of mortality as a human condition:

The Captain’s round, dark face, its eyes languorous now, contemplated the tourist with apparent interest. What could he mean, dangerous? How was he different?
But the Captain only shrugged. He knew it was absurd, that the game somehow continued, but the tourist sensed the way shadows played upon his face. It was as if his expression no longer concealed the skull beneath its flesh. (28)

Who, here, is “he”? Intercultural communication has a level of deep, bodily knowledge that is intercultural, indeed appears to be universal and undercuts any discursive formation.

Three decades later we may ask how the Canadian discourse concerning Latin America as reflected in fictional literature may have changed, may have moved beyond the stasis indicated by the Globe and Mail comment quoted at the beginning of the previous chapter, that is, the lack of serious political interest, and beyond the self-criticism characterizing Atwood’s novel. After all, Canada’s role in the world has grown, NAFTA has brought a shared economic market with at least one major Latin American country, and Canadian society has grown multicultural due, also, to the influx of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean. And Canadian culture has become much richer and diversified. At the same time, things in Latin America have changed dramatically: the enormous growth of populations; the rise of at least Mexico and Brazil to the status of semi-industrial countries and, in the case of Brazil, of a coming world power; the demise of most military dictators; the greater political freedom of action due to the end of the Cold War; the accelerated destruction of natural habitats; the worsening situation in the field of drug production and trafficking; the rise of new leftist leaders and movements in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Mexico, and other countries; and the reawakening of indigenous populations are just a few factors that have changed the social and political landscape in major parts of Latin America. How does literature respond to these developments?

Space does not permit an analysis of George Szanto’s impressive Mexican trilogy beginning with The Underside of Stones, initially (1990) published as a “story cycle” and later reclassified as a novel when The Condesa of M. (2001) and Second Sight (2004) were added, the latter a novel filling in the temporal space between the other two texts. The Underside of Stones is somehow positioned between Mexican American writer Josephina Niggli’s story cycle Mexican Village (1945) and postmodernism, with elements of magical realism added. It establishes the figure of the narrator, Szanto’s somewhat fictionalized alter ego Jorge, a Canadian criminology professor spending a year in the fictional Mexican village Michoácánuaro in the real state of Michoacán in order to get over the death of his wife. Michoácánuaro as a world of physical locations, characters, and events is constructed by stories that find their way into the second-level stories written down by Jorge.
The wonderful balance and ambivalence between the factual and the (cultural) imaginary, between what Jorge can accept as real and another reality he is exposed to and that enters his awareness of the Other, is not kept up the same way in *Second Sight*, which is more of a political crime mystery, nor in *The Condesa of M.*, where the intertwining of a historical and a present-day thread of narrative, as well as the experienced presence of characters from the past, create a form of romance (in the Hawthornian sense) and shift the balance in the direction of magical realism. In all three books, we get abundant information about contemporary Mexico, the roles of the church and the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, the Mexican Institutional Revolutionary Party), folk practices and the clash of tradition and modernity. What makes the books particularly rewarding is the oscillation of Jorge's role as the superior, all-knowing rationalist and criminologist from “Norte America”—people here do not seem to make much difference between Canada and the United States—and as the ignorant, fumbling foreigner not knowing if he can trust what he sees and, particularly, hears. This oscillation makes for wonderful situational ironies that are in many cases exemplary for the encounter of North and Latin Americans.

I will focus instead on novels published since 2007. My first example, *The Buenos Aires Broken Hearts Club* (2007) by Jessica Morrison (aka Jessica Raya), is chick lit, pure and simple, and might be seen as a watered-down version of *Bodily Harm*. In a single day, the twenty-eight-year-old protagonist Cassie loses her job, her apartment, and her fiancé. During a drunken spree, she books a six-month stay in Buenos Aires. After her initial panic is overcome, she finds most people friendly and the city not really that different from what she is familiar with. She has an affair with a fantastic Latin lover, sleeps a few times with a perfect but finally boring American, and eventually winds up in the arms of Mateo, an Argentine painter. She has used her blog to tell the world about her troubles and goes on to create a commercially successful website for broken hearts exchanges, which enables her to stay with Mateo for good. The worst bodily harm Cassie complains about is that she hasn’t had sex for four weeks. She gets to know very little about Argentina because all she cares for are personal relationships. Thus, if *Bodily Harm* reveals the sameness of the Other in terms of oppression and victimization, *The Buenos Aires Broken Hearts Club* shows the Other as similar because the needs of young women concerning love and a good income are the same throughout the hemisphere. Morrison avoids the question of a specifically Canadian perspective by making her protagonist come from Seattle rather than from her own city, Vancouver, but that doesn’t lead to sharper conflicts. Thus, in another way than in Atwood’s novel, the gender discourse reduces cultural difference and leaves only that of men and
women. Both genders are lovely and lovable, at least in the shape of quite a few individuals Cassie meets.

Cassie remains more on the surface than even Atwood’s Rennie in her life in Canada. Although the Argentine metropolis has its specific architectural and cultural attractions, the Other appears as more or less the same, at least on the level of personal relations, which is what counts most for the protagonist. The one moment when Cassie might get involved more deeply is when she sees Las madres, the weekly march of the mothers of those who “were disappeared” during the period of the Dirty War against leftist dissenters. After learning what this is all about, she gets a closer look and has to admit, “It is a truly heartbreaking sight. Yet also one pouring out hope and love” (Buenos Aires, 134). However,

I step into the shadow of a tree, feeling that I am somehow intruding on a private moment, a glimpse into their country’s great grief not meant for my foreign eyes. But mostly, I am suddenly, deeply, to-the-core-of-my-bones ashamed of the way I’ve been acting about Antonio. Such self-indulgent behavior, and over someone I barely know. What is his [temporary!] disappearance compared to the loss they have suffered? I spot a nearby table with pamphlets and a collection jar. I take out all the paper money I have in my wallet and shove it into the jar. (134–35)

This is the level of profundity and social responsibility Cassie is allowed to reach. She sympathizes with the women, she writes about her encounter in her blog and also raises money for Las madres, and on a later occasion she is even pulled into the circle of the marching women by an Argentine friend and experiences a warm “‘Well come’” (283), but the question at the core of Bodily Harm, the universality of suffering and guilt, remains alien for Cassie. If the Other turns out to be much like the self, what remains truly different has to be repressed or safely pigeonholed in a slot called, for instance, “commiseration.” It never occurs to Cassie that as a US citizen, she has inherited some national historic guilt in this matter because of the support of the American government for the Argentine military dictatorship during its Dirty War against the leftist opposition. Her sympathy, much like a donation to a beggar at the corner, may contribute to making her appear a nicer character, but this is simply not her world, not her generation.

In a sense, however, this might amount to a welcome break in the discursive association of Latin America with violence. It remains to be seen if other texts will pursue this course in a more complex manner. Amanda Hale’s The Reddening Path (2007) isn’t one of them. On the contrary, it explores the topic of political repression far beyond what Atwood tried to do in Bodily
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*Harm.* The ambitious novel tells of the search of Paméla, the twenty-two-year-old adopted daughter of a lesbian couple from Toronto, to find her biological, her Maya mother in Guatemala. The mother, Fabiana, a victim of the genocidal war of the rightist Guatemalan government and military against the indigenous population during the last decades of the twentieth century, turns out to have survived first as the mistress of a member of the ruling class who exploits the fourteen-year-old girl sexually and is, indeed, Paméla’s father, and later as mistress of Ernesto, a high-ranking army officer, one of the killers. Paméla fails to take her mother back to Canada but is instead joined by Guadalupe, a young nun, another Maya war orphan, with whom she falls in love. As a parallel narrative, we get a fictionalized version of the life of Malinche, the Native mistress, guide, translator, and eventually victim of Hernán Cortés during and after the conquest of Mexico; that is, part of the book is a historical novel. Prologue and epilogue are rendered by Ixchel, the ancient Mexican goddess of weaving, water, the moon, and childbirth; she knows all, laments, and accepts.

Thus, the fates of the present-day Maya women are shown to be part of a 500-year-old war against the Native population and, also, an age-old war against women. Canada remains sketchy, as do Paméla’s foster mothers Fern and Hannah; it appears as a clean, well-lighted place playing a positive humanitarian role in contrast to the United States, which is involved in the Guatemalan atrocities. Two rationales for the intrusions into Mexico and Central America are schematically opposed: male conquest and exploitation versus female search for one’s mother and for love in general. The feminization of Latin America here reaches its peak. Where *The Buenos Aires Broken Hearts Club* all but negates cultural difference, *The Reddening Path* emphasizes it, but, much more strongly than *Bodily Harm*, analogizes it to the difference between victims and victimizers, which is here shown to be primarily that between women and men but also between the indigenous population and the European conquerors.¹³

*The Reddening Path*, a novel clearly related to ideas and topics of Third Wave feminism, is an important book because it drastically addresses the horrors of what is euphemistically called the “human rights violations” during the civil war in Guatemala, and because it points out the continuity of the power structure even today and hence the fragility and, sometimes, superficiality of the peace accord of 1996. It thereby reminds the North American reader of what occurred on the same continent and often with the approval and support of US governmental institutions and agencies.¹⁴ And because this is a Canadian novel, it might serve to remind the Canadian public of the infamous role played by Canadian mining companies in their collaboration with the Guatemalan government and the military, for
instance in the eviction and silencing of Maya farmers on land coveted by the companies, although this issue is not mentioned in the book. The novel is also important because it shows the identity problems of the thousands of indigenous children from Latin America who were adopted by Canadian or US American foster parents.

However, one might wish that these topics had been handled with more literary skill. Rarely is the language up to the complexities of Paméla’s situation. There are vestiges of a somewhat clichéd *écriture féminine*, for instance in the importance of dreams and other nonrational modes of approaching reality, but one has the feeling that the dreams of the characters are props to connect the various strands of the book and do not really open a symbolic level as they do in *Bodily Harm*. Hale’s introduction of the narrating, weaving goddess in the book’s frame resembles Leslie Marmon Silko’s use of the Pueblo Indian creator deity Thought-Woman in her novel *Ceremony*. However, while even Silko’s use of traditional sacred material was sometimes regarded as a problematic handling of religious taboos, even though the author is a tribal member, in Hale’s case the use of Maya mythic material amounts to cultural appropriation and epistemic violence. Similarly, modern indigenous characters such as Guadalupe’s village friend and advisor Chavela are used as focalizers just as easily as any others. Cultural alterity does not seem to be insurmountable in Hale’s view, and real alienity does not exist.15 Clearly, the parallelization of the fates of Malintzín/Malinche with those of the modern Maya women Paméla, Guadalupe, and Fabiana serves to demonstrate the continuity of the victimization of indigenous women and children, of genocidal violence, and of acts of betrayal.

For this purpose, the character of Malintzín is fictionalized and psychologized. As a child betrayed by her own mother and sold into slavery, she is in a way exculpated for her choosing Cortés as a protector and for committing treason against other indigenous populations, only to become a victim of betrayal once again when Cortés discards her. Yet the second function of this character is to make her the mother of *mestizaje*, the hybridization of races, peoples, and cultures, a process that is here anachronistically accelerated: “Everywhere he [Malintzín and Cortés’s son Martín] looked there were people like himself, mestizos with golden skin and almond-shaped eyes, not quite Spanish, not quite Indian” (*Reddening Path*, 305).16 In addition, Cortés’s sons already prefigure Creole resistance against the Spanish “motherland.” In this way, the ending is conciliatory even if Fabiana cannot escape her enthrallment by her captor—the complex psychology behind this or behind Ernesto’s laying his guilt complex at rest in her arms is only hinted at. The motif of hunger and the craving for food is well developed, and that of weaving as a metaphor of feminine and divine forms of creativity, though
somewhat cliché-ridden, is also put to good use, but on the whole there remains a feeling of disappointment about the unassimilated material and the unexplored depths of the alterity theme that offers itself for instance in the topic of adoption. The conciliatory, in some sense even escapist tendency of the book is made abundantly clear in the scene of Cortés’s death:

He knew himself scalpel of the king, scourge of the Gods, his greed and passion for power used to effect an inevitable evolution in which culture supplants nature. [. . .] As he rose above the earth, above the ocean, he saw the small part he had played in a great design, and he knew himself finally as essential and expendable. He was forgiven. (299)

Apart from the sheer sentimentality, this is an exoneration not only from the atrocities committed by Cortés and his troops, but from the European conquest of the Americas with all its consequences. “Nature” is here clearly associated with the indigenous population, a notion that one would have hoped had been long overcome, just like the nature-culture dichotomy. When Guadalupe joins her lover Paméla in Canada, we may discover a fictional glorification of a Canadian multiculturalism that would include not only Native and immigrant populations of any variety, but also sexual minorities and so forth, a northern vision that allows one to forget the intergroup horrors of the past and the present.

Although listed as detective fiction, Anthony Hyde’s A Private House (2007) is much more satisfactory as a work of literature. The novel repeats the pattern of sending female visitors to Latin America. This time there are two: Lorraine, an elderly Canadian widow who has to fulfill the somewhat unlikely wish of her and her husband’s deceased gay friend of handing a large sum to his former Cuban lover, Almado; and Mathilde, a youngish French journalist who has come to Havana to interview Bailey, a former Black Panther who has escaped to Cuba, and to hear his comments on Cuba in the twilight of the Castro regime. Mathilde falls in love with Bailey and they have a fulfilling affair before her return. Temporarily, she is under the influence of a beautiful lesbian and tourist-exploiting guide, Adamaris. Mathilde also helps Lorraine in her increasingly mystery-ridden quest for Almado, who turns out to be not only a male prostitute but also a petty criminal who may or may not have committed a murder in order to get hold of the passport of a young Canadian, Hugo, who has an uncanny resemblance to Almado.

Lorraine finds herself unable to unriddle the mysteries of identity and possible crime, but nonetheless leaves the money for Almado before her return to Canada. What is more important is that she overcomes her fits of
agoraphobia in view of the strangeness and heat of the Cuban capital as well as her narrow religious background with the help of Santería doctors and priestesses. This is part of the strength of the novel: its depictions of many aspects of contemporary Cuban life and society, from the urban topography to the rites of black religion, from the political atmosphere to the aesthetic impressions of the city, above all its sordid decay. Whether all these details are correct is beside the point: they are rendered as observed by outsiders—a Canadian woman, a French woman, and a black US American man who has spent decades in the country. But fortunately, Hyde commands a literary style that is capable both of incredibly precise realism and of metaphorical openness and indirection.

While the political complexities—Black Panther revolutionary ideas then and now, the fate of Castroism, and the disastrous impact of the US embargo on the common people—are mainly left to the conversations between Mathilde and Bailey, it is the Canadian Christian widow Lorraine who experiences the Other most drastically. Given the economic situation, it cannot come as a surprise that just about everybody the visitors meet is a hustler of some variety, but when Lorraine buys powdered milk for a young couple who claim to need it for their baby and then returns to the store only to witness how the milk is reexchanged into money, with a percentage for the saleswoman, she is overwhelmed by shame and revulsion but unsure whether these feelings are directed against the people who perpetrated the scam or against herself—as a gullible person but also as a person not willing to give unconditionally. Her conflicting impulses toward the Other and herself bring her to the brink of collapse as her agoraphobia overwhelms her:

All these streets ran into the labyrinth of the ancient city, Habana Vieja. O’Reilly. Obispo. Obraapia. One was as good as another; whichever one she took, that was where she ran. But the street was jammed with people, talking, walking, pushing, looking. She tried to get by. More lay ahead. And the road was so rough, so broken, so cracked, so cut across, so holed, that now she couldn’t run, she could barely walk, and all the horror that her steps had fled now caught her, seized her by the legs, wrapped round her thighs, crushed her buttocks and her back—she was rigid now. She staggered. She looked around. She wanted to cry out, I need help. Her voice was still. Voices, faces, pressed upon her. Signs: No Arrojar Basura . . . Un Mundo Mejor Es Possible . . . La Cita Es Con La Patria . . . Giron Triunfo del Pueblo—they seemed to be everywhere. She stumbled into a cross street. She was gasping. She was so afraid. (Private House, 69)

What saves Lorraine shortly afterward is a group of schoolboys playing marbles whose rules of game she manages to decipher. Alienity isn’t total;
some communication is possible. She is later courageous enough to explore
the whereabouts of Almado on her own. When she enters the derelict build-
ing he is supposed to inhabit, she encounters “a dark, Gothic fantasy world”
(227) where the abject seems to be the distinguishing feature: “It was an
odour infinitely older than anything she might encounter in her native land;
poverty, misery, and death distilled into the stench of eternity” (226). And
then she inspects Almado’s mattress:

It was an awful sight. And yet now she knelt, sinking down through her own
astonishment, and placed the palm of her hand on it and then forced herself
to clench her fingers, seizing a fold of the cloth. Pity flowed into her, when
she might have expected disgust. She reached out again, and with the tips of
her fingers touched a dark, stiff patch of the fabric, like a scab or the lesion
of some ghastly disease. [. . .] She knew she wasn’t pitying Almado, certainly
not, not even Hugo. Was it Murray? Dear Murray, lying on this bed. He had
lain with this man. He had shared his body, on some bed. And wasn’t it only
chance, or the grace of God, that had placed Murray in his bed, and Almado
here? But then that was true of everyone, including herself. She reached out,
trailing her fingers across all the dreadful stains she could reach, blood, shit,
semen, whatever they were; but they were what everyone was, even if their
feather beds and their silk pyjamas allowed them the delusion that they were
deserving, and something else. She closed her eyes. You can pray anywhere,
Don used to say, but no, I can’t, I can’t pray here, she thought. It was too
terrible a place. (228)

When she then discovers what she thinks are vestiges of Hugo’s murder,
Lorraine’s panic returns. What saves her now and in a more fundamental
way is her encounter with an alien religion. As a devout Christian North
American, she yields herself to the rituals of Santería and thereby experi-
cences in a positive, healing and liberating way the effects of a situation of
religious transdifference. And she realizes that the causes of her panic are
not only things “‘out there’” but “claustrophobic spaces” like that “horrid
room” (242) as well: “So she was afraid of something horrible and murder-
ous inside herself, presumably Freudian—she was trying to flee it, deny it—
but even if she’d wanted to murder her mother, she hadn’t. Had her mother
murdered her? Was there a dead body inside her, lurking—was she really a
zombie?” (242–43). Lorraine encounters the abject as the ambiguous core
of the real and can henceforth, after her healing ceremony, accept the union
of the self and the Other in the ambiguities of identity, murder and rescue,
home and abroad.

In this novel, for once, we have the Other in its finally indecipherable
strangeness, and it is the experience and not the complete correctness of the
observation that is important. Identity positions are fluid, shifting: white and black, gay and straight, Native and non-Native, European, Canadian, US American, and Cuban are no fixed categories. Near the end, Lorraine even wonders whether the Almado she has met may have been Hugo, the Canadian, in disguise, whether he may have killed Almado rather than the other way around. Now she and, in a different way, Mathilde, too, are capable of accepting the openness of existence in all its constellations. Differences are not explained away, but allegiances may go in several directions at the same time. The superimposition of ethnic, gender, and sexual discourses creates transdifference, the simultaneous experience as conflicting subject positions. Both protagonists return home with a changed identity, and in this respect the book follows an old pattern in inter-American fiction. However, the metaphor of agoraphobia or, more generally, the fear of other places, and the overcoming of this fear, may be the author’s message for his Canadian compatriots in these days of global connection, change, and fluctuation.

Here, as in inter-American literature at large, some such message seems to be represented best not in fiction but in the condensations of poetry, as in William H. New’s lovely volume Touching Ecuador (2006):

Colour: it rustles everywhere,

which way to look first, everything is unfamiliar, tourist

becomes traveller
in the slow upheaval of connecting:

touching difference as soon as familiarity: laugh, you cry; travel, you stay at home: nowhere is without the way you see it, words, words, corruptibility:

Learn by seeing, the monks averred: I turn, I look,

I see—how architects built llamas into the walls of the new church, tortoises and condors among the saints and gargoyle-decorated demons:

Boundaries: who knew how far the flock would stray—