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# “Globalized Philomels: State Patriarchy, Transnational Capital, and the Femicides on the US-Mexican Border in Roberto Bolaño’s 2666”

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**GLOBALIZED PHILOMELS:  
STATE PATRIARCHY, TRANSNATIONAL  
CAPITAL, AND THE FERMICIDES ON THE  
US-MEXICAN BORDER IN  
ROBERTO BOLAÑO'S 2666**

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“The U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* [is an open wound]  
Where the Third World grates against the First and bleeds”  
- Gloria Anzaldúa

**THE SEMANTICS OF NEOLIBERALISM AND  
SUBALTERN WOMEN'S RAPE**

American readers may remember the dreadful case of a female jogger raped in Central Park in 1989; if only vaguely, you may perhaps recall that the incident prompted Donald Trump to take out “a full-page ad in four New York newspapers demanding that New York ‘Bring Back the Death Penalty, Bring Back Our Police’” (Crenshaw 184-5). Miraculously, the victim survived the brutal attack, but her case outraged the community and was widely reported and assiduously followed—now there is even a *Wikipedia* entry under “Central Park Jogger case” explaining the nuances of the horror that this white, Yale-educated woman, who at the time worked in investment banking, endured.<sup>1</sup>

Without minimizing the completely undeserved violation this woman suffered, I am curious about the reaction—more specifically, whose reaction—this case generated, especially considering that there were 3,254 other cases of rape reported in New York that year, “twenty-eight” during that fateful week alone (185):

Many of these rapes were as horrific as the rape in Central Park, yet all were virtually ignored by the media. Some were gang rapes, and in a case that prosecutors described as ‘one of the most brutal in recent years,’ a woman was raped, sodomized, and thrown fifty feet off the top of a four-story building in

Brooklyn. Witnesses testified that the victim “screamed as she plunged down the air shaft. . . . She suffered fractures of both ankles and legs, her pelvis was shattered and she suffered internal injuries. This rape survivor, like most of the other forgotten victims that week, was a woman of color [and, if I may add, of a different social class]. (185)

Explaining why the Central Park jogger spiraled into a media spectacle and prompted the intervention of a New York-based real estate mogul would be stating the obvious. The reason all the other cases generated little or no attention seems, admittedly, embarrassing.

The above case, though utterly unfortunate, suggests a clear difference between victims of sexual violence who receive attention and action and those ignored because of their worthlessness in terms of class and race within the current neoliberal model. The insignificance of the abject presence of subaltern third-world is paradoxical in light of the fact that they have now been turned into a key component for the global economic engine to run smoothly—an engine that, as suggested in Gloria Anzaldúa’s metaphor, is being lubricated with subaltern women’s (literal) blood.

Readers may then be outraged to learn about the shockingly high rates of rape and murder of women that have occurred since 1993 on the US-Mexican border, one year after the signing of the North Atlantic Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This treaty facilitated the installation of “maquiladoras”—assembly plants for transnational corporations (80% of them American-owned) that mushroomed in the new export processing zones (EPZs). As a consequence, widespread migration to the border, especially female, skyrocketed.<sup>2</sup> Taking “signs for wonders,” many saw these maquiladoras as a capitalist-God-sent blessing, feeling that they would bring a much needed boost to the Mexican economy. In fact, during their stay in Ciudad Juárez—the largest border city, literally within walking distance of El Paso, Texas—these plants allowed the municipality to boast the lowest unemployment rate of all Mexico (and, later, less glamorously, the highest incidence of domestic violence in the country).<sup>3</sup>

Like sweatshops, maquiladoras offered women the possibility of economic independence—at an appallingly exploitative price, of course, but some independence nonetheless. Looking for these new jobs, migrants from poor states such as Chiapas, Guerrero, Oaxaca, Tabasco, and even poor countries like Guatemala, flooded Ciudad Juárez, forcing the city to accommodate the demands of a rapid population explosion.

Ironically, part of the NAFTA agreement stipulated that the foreign assembly plants would be exempt from taxation in the host country, so the costs of social services and infrastructure generated by the influx of these migrant workers could never be met by the city's already meager budget.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the city's slums grew exponentially, while basic services such as electricity, sewage, transportation, and public safety for these areas lagged behind, creating a breeding ground for the atrocious crimes for which Ciudad Juárez became notorious: the femicides.

Mexico, a country that during his stay in 1938 struck André Breton as the most "surreal" in the world, becomes the stage for gendered sexual terror in Bolaño's narrative. Profoundly intrigued by the horror of the crimes and the impunity with which the perpetrators of the femicides operated, Bolaño began steady correspondence with Sergio González Rodríguez, one of the Mexican journalists covering the murders in Ciudad Juárez with courageous rigor. The result was *2666* (published posthumously in 2004), Bolaño's monumental last novel in which the writer sheds a tenebrous light on the way in which transnational capital, patriarchy, and the state have enabled the vicious deaths of subaltern "disposable" women. Here, the structural economic situation, with the majority of the population living in dire poverty and forced to migrate to the dangerous US-Mexican border in a quest for survival, combines with patriarchy and widespread impunity in a lethal concoction.

Basing his writing in the real crimes, Bolaño finds a rather unusual way of linking neoliberalism and patriarchy with sexual violence against subaltern women, yet there lies one of the strongest lures of his novel: through impassive repetition of the horror, the author showcases an extreme example of an economic system that privileges profits over lives, while the narrative opens up the spectrum of feminist interrogation as these femicides seem lost in a theoretical limbo. To this day, no responsible party has been found for the Juárez femicides and, as time passes and contexts change--if it wasn't for novels like the one under analysis--these women may very well end up lost in oblivion. After all, like New York's "unimportant" rape victims, they are poor and they are dark.

#### **RAPED AND SILENCED PHILOMELS IN ROBERTO BOLAÑO'S *2666***

Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño eludes easy judgment from critics and readers alike. He "emerged" in the 1990s and brought a fresh voice to Latin American narratives (so tightly associated with magic realism),

fusing his individual talent with a tradition spearheaded by established literary figures such as Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Gabriel García Márquez, and Mario Vargas Llosa, to name some of the most prominent Latin American writers who, like Bolaño, managed to transcend continental boundaries. Despite his undeniable merits, Bolaño's position in the canon is still debated, but because of his increasing readership and significant critical impact, we can foresee that this author will soon share the podium with other Latin American literary icons. Bolaño's conspicuous omission from Carlos Fuentes's recent *La Gran Novela Latinoamericana* [The Great Latin American Novel], where Fuentes analyzes the trajectory of Latin American literature from colonial times to the present, speaks of the degree of caution with which some canonical writers have approached the author, while, at the same time, many critics and readers especially in Latin America and Europe rave about his work and have propelled Bolaño to stardom. In the United States, Susan Sontag's blessing of Bolaño's earlier work as "the real thing, and the rest," has certainly contributed to his welcoming into the American literary market (qtd. in Stavans). An undeniable provocateur, by the time of his death at age fifty, many critics concurred that Bolaño "was widely considered the most important Latin American novelist since Gabriel García Márquez" (Valdes 9). Controversies aside, Bolaño has achieved the status of a cult author whose literary gift gained him entrance to the demanding circle of academia—where it looks like he will remain.<sup>5</sup>

Like that of Borges (whom he deeply admired), Bolaño's work is difficult to define because of its intellectual sophistication, and yet, for all its stylistic ambition, a raw sense of humor drawn from the most ordinary circumstances pervades the pages. In *The New York Review of Books*, Sarah Kerr observes that

the results of his work are multi-dimensional, in a way that runs ahead of a critic's one-at-a-time powers of description. Highlight Bolaño's conceptual play and you risk missing the sex and viscera in his work. Stress his ambition and his many references and you conjure up threats of exclusive high-modernist obscurity, or literature as a sterile game, when the truth is it's hard to think of a writer who is less of a snob, or—in the double sense of exposing us to unsavory things and carrying seeds for the future—less sterile. (Kerr)

Indeed, Bolaño's work is anything but sterile. Throughout his short but productive literary career, the author chose topics with heavy social

weight, generally veiled in the background of his characters' lives, yet unmistakably present in the narratives. Like James Joyce, when confronted with questions about his politics Bolaño often diverted his answer towards fiction, linking his ethics with his aesthetics--there lies the canvas where he addresses, arguably, intensely politicized material (Macaya 129). If anything, exposing evil and violence becomes a constant in Bolaño's oeuvre: his books have dealt with Nazism, the infamous abuses committed during the Chilean military government of Augusto Pinochet, the army raid on Mexico's UNAM University in 2000, and the vicious rapes and murders of women on the US-Mexican border at the center of *2666* (125).

This novel's storyline is intricate and unpredictable. In a cryptic style reminiscent of Borges, the author weaves together the first world and the third world through a mystery: all roads lead to the female murders in Santa Teresa, a city first conceived in his previous novel *The Savage Detectives* (1998), while the mysterious title originally came to light in *Amulet* (1999).<sup>6</sup> The author divided the book into five parts, each one addressing the lives of apparently unrelated characters who converge (at different times) in the city of death. Placed at the core of the novel, the gruesome deaths of countless poor and racialized women become the Lacanian "real" of Bolaño's narrative—the ugly, traumatic, and ever-present junction where many different characters intersect.<sup>7</sup> For the sake of keeping the focus on the relation between subaltern women, patriarchy, and global capital, this article will explore Part Four, "The Part about the Crimes," referring to the other parts where they relate and contribute to our understanding of the femicides and the structural causes enabling them.<sup>8</sup>

Still, a brief summary may help readers. In Part One, "The Part about the Critics," we find a group of European literary critics from "old" imperial Italy, Spain, England, and France, who meet because of their interest in an enigmatic German writer: Benno von Archimboldi. Their search for the author leads them to Santa Teresa, Mexico, where they learn by accident of the female murders. Part Two, "The Part about Amalfitano," deals with a Chilean professor and translator of some of Archimboldi's works, Oscar Amalfitano, self-exiled after the military coup in his native country, and now living in Santa Teresa with his beautiful seventeen-year-old daughter. Despite dwelling in the "infernal" city, their social class separates them from the perils of migrant workers and allows them to live (for the most part) unaffected

by the dangers facing poor women (Bolaño 436). Part Three, “The Part about Fate,” concerns the African-American journalist Antonio Fate, who comes from New York to Santa Teresa to cover a boxing match for an African-American newspaper. Again by chance, he learns about the murders. Fate wants to write a report on the killings, which are strikingly unknown in the US, but his editor denies his request on the grounds that there are no African-Americans involved. Part Four, “The Part about the Crimes,” centers on the femicides: one by one, we hear a litany of murders described in aseptic, disengaged language. In between, Bolaño sprinkles references that could possibly account for the violence. The last pages of Part Four, for example, reveal that a well-to-do woman (Kelly Rivera Parker) has disappeared, and we later discover that she has been involved in organizing a prostitution ring that caters to powerful circles in Santa Teresa. Readers also hear about the porn film industry and snuff films—a veiled suggestion that Santa Teresa could be the world capital of the snuff movie. The last part of the novel, “The Part about Archimboldi,” uncovers the past and present of the elusive writer Benno von Archimboldi, who travels to Mexico with the intention of helping his German nephew, imprisoned and accused of committing the femicides.

The female victims of abduction dominate Part Four. In their representation, Bolaño resorts to an innovative stylistic technique: constant repetition of fragmented post-mortem snippets that don’t reveal much about the women’s lives. From a clearly detached perspective, the author unsettles his audience with descriptions of countless corpses that keep appearing showing signs of torture and sexual violence throughout. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Julia Kristeva observes that “[t]he corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall) [. . .] upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance[.] The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything[.] seen without God and outside of science, [it] is the utmost of abjection” (3-4). Unlike the majority of literary works representing the complex subjects of rape, torture, and murder (which tend to follow the life of a victim/survivor protagonist), here the author offers a new way of seeing these abducted women, now abject corpses whom we encounter only as anonymous mutilated bodies once they have already been kidnapped, raped, and killed. Readers are not privy to the victims’ stories or motivations, but are forced instead to put together the pieces of a puzzle in order

to understand why these women constantly show up dead in some dumpster or the desert while the author, consistent with his style, never promises a satisfying resolution. Indeed, the point seems less to find the killer(s) than to become engulfed in the horror happening in Santa Teresa, a stage that almost feels set up for the perpetrators to elude justice and disappear. Just like in real-life Ciudad Juárez, those who kidnap, rape, and murder remain conspicuously absent from the pages.

Part Four begins with the appearance of a body that will be followed by countless more: “The girl’s body turned up in a vacant lot in Colonia Las Flores. She was dressed in a white long-sleeved T-shirt and yellow knee-length skirt, a size too big. Some children found her and told their parents. One of the mothers called the police, who showed up half an hour later. [. . .] We’ve never seen her before. She isn’t from around here, poor thing” (Bolaño 353). Reading along, we learn that “[t]his happened in 1993. January 1993. From then on, the killings of women began to be counted” (353). Later, the body of the alleged first victim claims an identity: “Esperanza [which in Spanish suggestively means ‘hope’] Gomez Saldaña and she was thirteen” (353). A judge and some Santa Teresa policemen examine the body and determine that the girl had been “strangled to death[,] vaginally and anally raped, probably more than once, since both orifices exhibited tears and abrasions, from which she had bled profusely” (354). Once the autopsy concludes, a “black orderly, who moved north from Veracruz years ago, put the body away in the freezer” (354).

In the above passage, the author immediately establishes definite features of this victim. The girl’s outfit, contrary to the suppositions of Mexican police throughout, hints that she is not a prostitute. When describing her clothes, Bolaño chooses adjectives such as “long-sleeved” or “knee-length,” subverting patriarchal discourses that blame victims of rape for their “provocative” attire. We also know that, reflecting the situation of myriad migrant workers who travel from pauperized states in search of a job at the border, the “poor thing” has come from somewhere else, and thus we can infer her indigence. Finally, the type of violence endured proves that she has been abducted for sexual purposes (leaving an open question about motivations other than sadistic rape) and, of course, that the perpetrator is a man. That the thirteen-year-old Esperanza (hope?) ends up in a freezer after an expert inspects her body shows that she has morphed into an object now, a number on a list--and there will be many more to come.



Readers then follow along the pages where one female body after another appears, while their description remains basically the same. As if perusing a forensic report, we often find an unknown female body, generally petite, long-haired, and dark-skinned, with the following characteristics: the body has been vaginally and anally raped (the “two-way” rape, as the police baptize it); the body has been tortured (most commonly with one breast severed and a nipple cut or bitten); the body shows signs of strangulation (fracture of the hyoid bone with hands or ropes); the body has been dumped (in the desert or one of the many city dumpsters); with luck, the body may be identified (frequently, a maquiladora worker snatched on her way to work), but, more often than not, the body ends up in a common grave, forever unknown. In between, we hear about the incompetence and negligence of the police, the apathy of state authorities, the lack of cooperation of maquiladora managers, the harassment endured by journalists investigating the story, and the pervasiveness of violence against women regardless.

Suggestively, Bolaño does not limit his representations to the infamous cases of serial abduction/rape/murder, although those recur throughout. In this way, Bolaño showcases that violence against women in general has become the “natural” state of affairs. By describing different contexts, the author insinuates that patriarchal violence is so pervasive that the orchestrator(s) of the femicides “Esperanza-style” have found in Santa Teresa a safe haven to let their evil impulses free. Even though the majority of the victims represented fall under Esperanza’s killers’ modus operandi—symptomatic of an organized crime—many unrelated female rapes and murders find a place in these pages, highlighting the danger especially lower-class women are exposed to both in the domestic and the public spheres. As Mexican women’s activist Esther Chavez Cano declares, “In this city [Ciudad Juárez], it is a disgrace to be a woman and much greater of a disgrace to be a poor woman” (qtd. in Rodríguez 113).

Right after Esperanza’s vignette, for instance, we learn that “five days later[,] Luisa Celina Vázquez was strangled. She was sixteen years old, sturdily built, fair-skinned, and five months pregnant” (Bolaño 354). Readers may initially assume that, because of the strangulation, this is another victim of serial abduction, rape, and murder. The narrator gives us some clues pointing otherwise, though, as the prototypical femicide victim tends to be petite and dark-skinned, while the murder weapon—Luisa Celina was “strangled with a television cord”—pigeonholes the

murder in the domestic violence category (354). Apparently, her lover killed her “in a fit of insanity” because she wanted to terminate their relationship (354-5). And that is all we are allowed to know for this particular case. Yet the more we dive into the pages, it becomes clearer that, along with the mysterious serial abductors, boyfriends, husbands, and lovers also kill.

The next scene shows that another female body has appeared “in an alley in the center of the city” (Bolaño 355). “She was about thirty and dressed in a black skirt and low-cut white blouse. She had been stabbed to death[. . .] In her purse was a ticket for the nine a.m. bus to Tucson, a bus she would never catch. Also found were a lipstick, powder, eyeliner, Kleenex, a half-empty pack of cigarettes, and a package of condoms” (355). From the contents of her purse, the police would probably assume that she was a prostitute and thus ignore her murder. Several scenes later, for example, the police find another female body in the desert with “red-painted nails, which lead the first officers on the scene to think she was a whore” (520). Within the official discourse surrounding the crimes, it is not only obviously sex-related objects such as condoms but also (more worryingly) innocuous ones such as red nail polish and lipstick--clearly feminine markers--that determine the alleged promiscuity of the victim. The assumption that female victims have transgressed established social norms is used to explain their rapes and murders and to justify the lack of interest in solving them. Half-way into Part Four, it does not surprise readers to hear that “[w]hen the forensic report finally arrived (the cause of death probably some kind of stab wound), everyone had forgotten the case, even the media, and the body was tossed up without further ado into the public grave” (520). Practically all of the cases, regardless of the victims’ presumed status, end like that.

In order to reinforce these women’s invisibility, Bolaño introduces in Part Four the case of the “church desecrator,” a man who breaks into churches to urinate on their floors, prompting a more aggressive police investigation than the search for the biggest serial killer(s) in the history of Mexico (and the world?). Only after the first “attacks” on the churches does a national newspaper send an art correspondent (Sergio González) to cover the story of the “Penitent,” as the sacriphobe was called, demonstrating that government officials in Mexico City are more concerned with church politics than anything to do with violence against poor women (Bolaño 376). Even though González learns about

the massive killing spree happening in Santa Teresa, when he returns to the capital city, he writes a report on the church desecrator and for a while forgets about the murdered women. The media in Santa Teresa does not offer much hope either: “[t]he attacks on [the churches of] San Rafael and San Tadeo got more attention in the local press than the women killed in the preceding months” (366). As for the police, they were too busy “wasting their time watching the city’s churches twenty-four hours a day” to ever give the femicides’ investigation a credible chance, generally because the victim’s morality comes under immediate scrutiny, evidencing the deep-rooted distrust and misogyny latent in the officers’ minds (405).

In a provocative scene, Bolaño satirizes some officers’ staunch chauvinism during a breakfast gathering where the cops in charge of the investigation relax and exchange jokes about women:

And the joker teller said: all right friends, what’s the definition of a woman? Silence. And the answer: *pues* a vagina surrounded by a more or less organized bunch of cells. And then someone laughed, an inspector, good one[,] a bunch of cells. And another joke, international this time: why is the Statue of Liberty a woman? Because they needed an empty head for the observation deck. And another one: how many parts a woman’s head is divided into? *Pues* that depends, *valedores!* Depends on what [. . .]? Depends on how hard you hit her. (552)

The list goes on, and the cruelty intensifies. The inspector then remembers a final truism: “women are like laws, they were made to be broken. And the laughter was general” (553). Needless to say, when these are the men in charge of preventing the murders in Santa Teresa, one stops wondering why the femicides are happening and starts thinking instead why not.<sup>9</sup>

According to Rosa Linda Fregoso, the official discourse initially constructed the victims of the femicides along the US-Mexican border as naïve or irresponsible individuals who transgressed the normal order: in Mexico, the place of a respectable woman is still within her family, be that with her father or her husband, so those who dare leave the sanctity of the familial unit in search of work and more economic independence pose a threat and, in a way, deserve their fate for contravening established norms (*Mexicana Encounters* 3). Fregoso further explains that the female victims have been represented “not simply as victims of globalization but as subjects in need of patriarchal

regulation” (10). Even well-intended documentaries on the feminicides like *Maquila: A Tale of Two Mexicos*, Fregoso suggests, insinuate that “women are killed for engaging in activities that exceed patriarchal gendered ‘norms’: hanging out in bars or on the street, working in the sex industry,” thus the need for their surveillance and policing (10). Emilia Escalante San Juan’s death in the novel, for instance, is explained by the police quite creatively: she was a worker at the maquiladora “New Markets” and “didn’t have a husband, although once every two months she went out to clubs downtown, with friends from work, where she usually drank and went off with some man. Practically a whore, said the police” (Bolaño 460). Such is the frustrating answer that readers repeatedly encounter; the rest remains an enigma.

In fact, we only know for sure that men are abducting these working-class women for sexual purposes. For the most part, these abject corpses are the only “real” mark we find within a web of uncertain speculations. Yet, while both in actual Ciudad Juárez and fictive Santa Teresa we still cannot pinpoint exactly why or by whom the victims have been raped, tortured, and killed--in the words of a police inspector, we “shouldn’t try to find a logical explanation for the crimes. It’s fucked up, that is the only explanation”--, the author includes two incidents that coincide with some of the stronger hypotheses on the Juárez murders: one, that the women could be kidnapped and trafficked to have sex with men from powerful circles in the area; two, that they could be unwilling actresses in snuff movies (Bolaño 561).

By the end of “The Part about the Crimes,” Kelly Rivera Parker, a well-off congresswoman’s friend, has disappeared. Through the help of Sergio González’s investigation, the politician learns that Kelly used to organize “parties” (initially with models, but later with prostitutes and poor local girls) in “narcorranchos” where narcos and the moneyed elites of Santa Teresa gathered. The guests’ resumes can only alarm: Kelly planned parties for a man who “owned a fleet of garbage trucks and was said to have an exclusive contract with most of the maquiladoras in Santa Teresa,” a “businessman with interests in Sonora, Sinaloa, and Jalisco,” and others with “connections to the Santa Teresa cartel [the Juárez cartel?]” (Bolaño 628).

So at Kelly’s parties “we have a banker[,] a businessman[,] a millionaire, [and several narcos], as well as other personages from the worlds of society, crime and politics. A collection of worthies” (629). Suggestively, these socialites’ bodyguards drive “black Suburbans or

Spirits or Peregrinos,” the vehicles which some of the victims have been spotted entering (sometimes by force, sometimes on their own volition) before appearing later dead and mutilated in some illegal dumpster or the desert (627). Speculating that these mafias can pull enough strings to silence some corrupt sectors of the local/national government and the police does not sound far-fetched, which Bolaño seems to insinuate by including such a “collection of worthies” in Part Four. As one reporter assures Antonio Fate, the protagonist journalist of Part Three, “[t]he arm of the killers is long, very long,” and it can certainly stretch and caress powerful circles in Mexico City (297).

The snuff hypothesis is as mysterious as the snuff industry itself. To this day, many doubt that these movies actually exist, arguing that they are an urban myth, but one that stubbornly persists. In *2666*, a journalist from Buenos Aires comes to write a report on the femicides. Once in Santa Teresa, and after some negotiation, he sees an alleged snuff movie and later writes “a long article about the killings of women in Santa Teresa. The article centered on the porn film industry and the underground subindustry of snuff films” (Bolaño 541). As for the real femicides, even though nothing has yet been proven, the type of violence inflicted on the victims has led investigators to contemplate a connection between the snuff film industry and the brutal femicides. By suggesting this possibility, the author opens a new can of worms in an already ugly scenario: raping, mutilating, and killing disposable third-world women in a Mexican “set” to be sold and consumed by anonymous DVD viewers who can pay for those illegal and expensive movies from a safe distance anywhere in the world.

All in all, until the final page of Part Four (which ends with the last killing of 1997), one female corpse after the other keeps appearing raped and dismembered. Looking for female victims’ agency in this section thus becomes a losing battle. Readers cannot find heroines here among those murdered, a reminder that reality sometimes forecloses Western audiences’ expectations of encountering third-world women who overcome their victimhood to evolve into hopeful survivors. While it would be a mistake to lump together all third-world women’s experiences under the same umbrella of oppression—which Chandra Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, and Caren Kaplan forcefully warn against—in this particular novel, the serial nature of these women’s abductions, rapes, and murders showcases an extreme case of patriarchal and economic exploitation, where third-world women are mercilessly

utilized and disposed of by global capitalism. One could propose that the existing economic system is sick (with millions of third-world women working under variable degrees of exploitation) and that, if untreated (not regulated by strong democratic governments and dependent instead on world finance institutions), it can lead to death.

#### THEORIZING THIRD-WORLD WOMEN IN THE NEOCOLONIAL CONTEXT

In *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*, Melissa Wright contends that the typical third-world female maquiladora worker, paradoxically, “generates widespread prosperity through her own destruction” (2). And even though those of us in the global North are connected to these women through the product of their exploitative labor, many only become aware of their abject existence through reading a novel about their outrageous deaths.<sup>10</sup> More uncomfortably, through the portrayal of these third-world women’s femicides, readers cannot escape the reality that bourgeois privileges in the global North (most of the women killed worked for maquiladoras that assemble cars, household appliances, spa products, etc.) are built upon the literal sacrifice of a disposable female workforce.

In this novel, patriarchy combines with class and race, delineating an invisible barrier between those who can be preyed upon and those preserved untouched. By providing emotionally removed representations of the victims (sharing only anthropological/socioeconomic details), one is constantly reminded that these women’s utter poverty and degree of pigmentation play a crucial role in their horrible fates. Part Two, for instance, gives readers a glimpse of a domestic scene where the worried father of a young girl (Professor Amalfitano) expresses his concerns regarding his daughter and the violence occurring in Santa Teresa, only to be reassured by a friend who brings attention to their privileged middle-class position, as “[s]he reminded him that the victims were usually kidnapped in *other* parts of the city [my emphasis]” (Bolaño 198-9).

Those “other” parts of the city are the pauperized slums where the majority of maquiladora workers live. Their appalling precariousness even scares the FBI agent (Albert Kessler) hired by the Mexican government to help with the investigation. Kessler drives through the neighborhoods “where the snatchings most often took place,” always escorted by police cars, later commenting to the press: “Walking the streets in broad daylight [. . .] is frightening. I mean: frightening for a man like me. The reporters,

none of whom lived in those neighborhoods, nodded. The officers, however, hid smiles” (Bolaño 605). In a bout of shortsightedness, however, Kessler further adds: “For a woman, [. . .] it is dangerous to be out at night. Reckless” (605). Clearly, something is rotten in Santa Teresa, yet, for these women, going out at night is not a matter of choice when their shifts at the maquiladoras demand that they walk deserted areas for miles at, say, four in the morning to begin their workday. That the agent calls them “reckless” only showcases his chauvinism: perhaps if the police enforced a curfew on men as a means to control the crimes, women would be able to walk safely to the assembly plants (of course, in the context of *2666*, this alternative sounds naively utopian—a valid subject for Latin American magic realism).

Which brings us to the maquiladora industry: in Part Four, Bolaño does not spare opportunities to allude to them and their possible link to the crimes. Their descriptions look nothing less than sinister. A female victim, Maria de la Luz Romero “had just started working at EMSA, one of the oldest maquiladoras in Santa Teresa, which [resembled] a melon-colored pyramid, its sacrificial altar hidden behind smokestacks and two enormous hangar doors through which workers and trucks entered” (Bolaño 450). Even though the plants offer a modern environment in stark contrast with the workers’ homes (clean, air-conditioned, with indoor sanitary facilities, cafeterias, etc.), the work demanded is considered so exploitative that only the most marginalized people seek jobs there, and these industries never offer any possibility of continuity or promotion (unless, as Melissa Wright analyzes, the worker is a man who can then train for a managerial post).

In fact, it has become “institutionalized” that these assembly plants rely on a disposable female population that must perform highly technical and specific work—monotonous but difficult—keeping the production line moving twenty-four hours a day. Melissa Wright notes that the typical maquiladora worker has a productive life of about five years; after that, she is usually disposed of because by then her body has lost dexterity and her value has diminished. Plant managers explain that to keep a maquiladora worker longer would translate into losses (the same goes for firing them before the five-year deadline, as the time invested in their training has not yet been amortized). The result is a constant turnover of workers who “are hired and fired at will” (Marx 9).

Bolaño alludes to this phenomenon openly. At the maquiladora “EastWest,” for example, an employee’s file “had been lost, which

wasn't uncommon at the maquiladoras, since workers were constantly coming and going" (Bolaño 414). As for the workers' shifts, they follow "no set pattern and obeyed production schedules beyond the workers' comprehension" (469). Ruled by the market dictum of supply and demand, the plants' goal is to constantly expel the finished product. This social hieroglyphic hides the exploitative human labor in the object assembled and transforms it into a fetish ready to be exchanged and consumed by those with the power to purchase it anywhere in the global North, while the worn-out mantra that "at least these plants offer third-world women jobs" assuages Western consciences and obliterates any consciousness of complicity.

That these plants necessitate female exploitation to prosper is no secret, and here we see the responsibility of the state in condoning such exploitation. Pressured by the IMF, national governments readily acquiesce to laws that grant transnational corporations (whose only interest is, of course, profit) power to determine salaries, work hours, and working conditions in the host country that would outrage workers in the headquarters at home. Repeatedly, the narrator recounts stories of employees "fired for trying to organize a union," suggesting that exploitation is the rule, and those who aspire to more dignified working conditions have no place in these plants (Bolaño 412). Bolaño's carefully researched novel draws this connection between the maquiladoras and the crimes quite visibly. Not coincidentally, the feminist anthropologist Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos emphasizes that the chosen femicide victims follow a disturbing pattern: they are poor, dark-skinned, young, and "many of them worked in the maquilas" (xv).

In "The Part about the Crimes," readers do not witness any murder, yet Bolaño's decision to show the aftermath of the violence through countless repetition proves to be a powerful alternative. In keeping with the real-life scenario, the author does not allow the female victims to claim moments of agency while still alive or struggling for their lives, bringing attention to those vulnerable populations that otherwise would not receive much attention. One only has to think of the relatively modest governmental action the US-Mexican border femicides sparked nationally and internationally (despite the appalling number of victims) in order to understand the degree of indifference towards "disposable" subaltern women. In this respect, Grant Farred observes in "The Impossible Closing: Death, Neoliberalism, and the Postcolonial in Bolaño's *2666*":



Writing neoliberalism, Bolaño's work insists that if the postcolonial will not speak directly, (un)ethically, its relation to the neoliberal, then all that there is left to do is to dramatize, in a horrible fashion [. . .] the constitutive presence of death in the everyday functioning of the maquiladoras. Death, moreover, not as metaphoric or symbolic, but as a brutal, inexplicable, fact of the neoliberal postcolonial state: the death of the maquiladora women derives its political effect from its unremarkable, and therefore consequential, regularity. (693)

As a stylistic choice, the author emphasizes the quantity of murders more than the quality of the violence (which is present, but not experienced). Bolaño thus offers a distant gaze that leads audiences to empathize through understanding the shocking number of femicides, the impunity killers enjoy, and the apathy of society in general. Readers in turn are invited to question such willful ignorance, when we know that these women sustain the world economy from behind the scenes at their own expense. And while the corpses represented intentionally horrify, they place the abject within our globalized culture under a necessary spotlight.

Along with the female corpses that cyclically emerge brutally violated in the desert, then, readers are reminded once again of the limits of theory. Let us think, for example, of the subversive power Homi Bhabha finds in the hybrid identity of the subaltern, a premise that so brilliantly explained the colonizer/colonized relation during the territorial colonization of India, but one that cannot account for the powerlessness of the victims of rape and slaughtering in Santa Teresa. Instead of destabilizing the system, these women's deaths actually seem to invigorate it. Time and again, Bolaño's novel shows that these femicides have been deliberately downplayed by the police and the government, so when, by the end of the novel, no credibly responsible person is charged with the crimes, readers cannot miss the alarming degree of unconcern towards those victimized at the lowest strata of society.

In the voice of a clairvoyant (Florita Almada) who acts like the only moral compass in "The Part about the Crimes," in Santa Teresa reigns "[s]uch a terrible apathy and such a terrible darkness" (Bolaño 437), but no Yeatsian "terrible beauty" is ever born here. Instead, the femicides are handled with such impunity and calculated silencing by the patriarchal ideological and repressive state apparatuses (to borrow Louis Althusser's terminology) that these deaths only highlight

hierarchical power structures more emphatically and in turn seem to affirm that the rights of elites with their economic interests prevail. Arguably, when the poor in their most insignificant version (racialized women) do not have access to justice--when justice isn't *blind*--what is left for them?

Early in the 1960s, Frantz Fanon predicted in his postcolonial landmark *The Wretched of the Earth* that class, more than race, would perpetuate the oppression typical of the colonial situation. In Fanon's view, local elites that had absorbed imperial attitudes would continue to exploit the lower classes just like France used to do in Algeria or England in India before World War II. Immersed in the current global economic context, Anne McClintock takes a similar stand when she poses a question about the accuracy of the term "postcolonial," as she observes that

[s]ince the 1940s, the U.S.' imperialism-without-colonies has taken a number of distinct forms (military, political, economic and cultural), some concealed, some half-concealed. The power of U.S. finance capital and huge multinational corporations to command the flows of capital, research, consumer goods and media information around the world can exert a coercive power as great as any colonial gunboat. It is precisely the greater subtlety, innovation and variety of these forms of imperialism that make the historical rupture implied by the term postcolonial especially unwarranted. (13)

Like Grewal and Kaplan in *Scattered Hegemonies*, McClintock contests the binary notions of "colonizer-colonized, self-other, dominance-resistance, metropolis-colony, colonial-postcolonial" because in the current deregulated global framework they do not reflect a much more porous reality, where we can find the first world within the third world and vice versa (15)--in fact, the world's known richest man, as of today, is Mexican.<sup>11</sup> In such a context, McClintock points out: "I argue that [. . .] gender is not synonymous with women. [. . .] I argue that feminism is as much about class, race, work and money as it is about sex" (7).

Novels like the one under analysis then demand fresh approaches to theorizing the female subaltern in all her complexity and heterogeneity. Other feminist scholars such as Marjorie Stone and Teresa L. Ebert observe that North American and European feminisms have privileged aspects of female individuality, empowerment, and celebratory sexuality to the detriment of subaltern women who do not fit those paradigms.

Stone refers to Ebert's *Ludic Feminism and After* (1996), where Ebert claims that "postmodern feminisms have focused on theories of desire, performativity, linguistic play, difference, and discourse to the relative exclusion of theories and analyses of class, capitalism, oppression, and 'patriarchy'" (35). Quoting Ebert, Stone further adds that "the playful 'indeterminacy' ludic feminism 'posits as a mark of resistance' is, 'in actuality, a legitimization of the class politics of an upper-middle class Euroamerican feminism obsessed with the freedom of the entrepreneurial subject'" (35). Criticism such as Stone's and Ebert's highlights theoretical gaps and tensions that Bolaño's novel showcases in all crudity: the link, for example, between women in the global North and those in the global South through the product of the latter's exploitative labor. As Spivak has analyzed in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," just like Bertha Mason perishes so that Jane Eyre can become the Victorian feminist heroine of the genre (in Spivak's words, "a cult text of feminism"), super-exploited subaltern women today are perishing so that their first-world sisters can enjoy the fruits of their emancipation (362).

Above all, these third-world women share an inherent disposability. As Melissa Wright observes, "when workers are determined to be worthless or when women's corpses are dumped like trash in the desert, these discourses explain how, given these women's 'intrinsic worthlessness,' such events are both natural and unavoidable" (18). Yet the tacit questions this novel articulates still remain: what ideological mechanisms become activated in order to take as "natural" (that is, not a subject of interrogation) the fact that a woman assembling a component in Mexico deserves an infinitesimal portion of what she would receive had she assembled the same component in the US? Who benefits from this "natural" rule? Why is there such apathy regarding these third-world women's plights? More alarmingly, *2666* showcases a truly disturbing side of exploitation as the majority of the victims of serial abduction, rape, and murder work at the maquiladoras that cater to the global North's consumerist needs. In this respect, Anne McClintock accurately contends that "it is at the crossroads of contradictions that strategies for change may best be found" (15). Though bluntly, Bolaño's *2666* highlights such contradictions and opens the possibility of an inquisitive dialogue.

Under men's reluctant eyes, the past few decades have witnessed the migratory phenomenon of an increasing number of women desperately

looking for a means of sustenance for themselves and often families left back home. Because of global capitalism's pervasiveness, women now constitute the bulk of the workforce worldwide, so this trend has forced neo-conservative patriarchal societies to rethink gender roles and the family as women increasingly challenge men's privileged position of sole economic providers. Within this work frame, women are displacing traditional male subjects who allegedly cannot compete with their "dexterity," "docility," "patience," "attentiveness," and "cheapness" (Wright 25). But despite the need for these third-world women to sustain the economic world engine, their situation remains deplorable.

In a cynical turn, however, the appalling situation Bolaño describes at the core of *2666* has changed during the past ten years--for the worse. Mexican maquiladoras enjoyed their heyday between 1993 and 2003 but, as of now, many of the assembly plants have left Mexico, partly because of the drug wars, and partly because of more capital-friendly trade agreements between the US and Asia. There, maquiladoras found women more "willing" to work for even less money and under more exploitative practices.<sup>12</sup>As a result, Ciudad Juárez now bears the empty skeletons of those abandoned factories and those abandoned women, while the drug wars between Mexican cartels have turned it into the most dangerous city in the world.

In *Roberto Bolaño: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, Marcela Valdes explains that in *2666* the author intended "to write a postmortem for the dead of the past, the present and the future" (15). Were Bolaño still alive, he might have felt disappointed (but probably not surprised) to learn that the femicides have been relegated to the shadows as the more prominent male drug-related murders have gained central stage in Mexico and the international media, proving once again that only some victims (like the Central Park jogger) deserve attention and action. The fate of the young women of Juárez—who will likely continue to appear raped, mutilated, and abandoned in the desert--have become "secrets in the sand," to borrow the Chilean poet Marjorie Agosín's book title honoring them. Right now, on the US-Mexican border, the pressing topic is drug traffic, not sex traffic. But throughout its almost nine hundred pages, Bolaño's novel seems to whisper in his audiences' ears: have the lives and deaths of these disposable women *ever* been a pressing topic?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> By providing details on the victim's social and cultural background, I am trying to establish her class and race, as they will be relevant to my analysis of the rapes and murders occurring on the US-Mexican border.

At the same time, there are plenty of studies demonstrating that, while some sectors of the female population are obviously more vulnerable, women endure domestic violence regardless of class and race; the same applies to rape and murder by an unknown attacker. In this case, I wanted to bring attention to the kind of victims that generate more media coverage and public outrage. It is also worth mentioning that Donald Trump clearly has vested interests in the retail value of the real estate around Central Park and its perception as a "safe" area for potential buyers.

<sup>2</sup> Some examples of maquiladoras ("maquilas" for short) that were established along the US-Mexican border include Ford, General Electric, General Motors, RCA, Chrysler to name a few. For further information, see Rodríguez.

<sup>3</sup> It is worth mentioning that a job at a maquiladora is considered so exploitative and underpaid that the local population of border cities such as Ciudad Juárez would rather find other types of jobs instead; consequently, the maquila jobs have been filled primarily by migrants from pauperized states such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, etc.

<sup>4</sup> Teresa Rodríguez explains that "[u]nder NAFTA, tax breaks enjoyed by the maquiladora industry [were] no longer [. . .] confined to the border area but they [became] available throughout Mexico. The US and Mexican governments anticipated that the provision would entice manufacturers to leave the overstressed border area and expand into Mexico's interior"; however, their calculations were wrong, as "the maquiladoras of the northern region increased employment dramatically" instead of moving somewhere else (8).

<sup>5</sup> For further details on Bolaño's critical reception, see Pollack (2009), Stavans (2008), Zavala (2006), and Corral (2006).

<sup>6</sup> The number on the title evokes apocalyptic evil; it was first referenced in *Amulet*, where "a threatening late-night street resembles 'cemetery in the year 2666'" (Tyler).

<sup>7</sup> Five hundred is an estimate number of the victims at the time Bolaño was writing; some sources calculate that by now there have been more than 1,000 femicides, and that they continue to occur with impunity. See Fregoso.

<sup>8</sup> I want to acknowledge that this analysis will not do justice to the complexities of Bolaño's novel in all its magnitude and scope, with its almost nine hundred pages in the English version.

<sup>9</sup> The author is careful not to portray all the police officers in a negative light. One of his characters, Lalo Cura, tries to investigate and solve the cases, but he lacks resources and support from those above him. In the real Ciudad Juárez, police officers only need a certificate showing that they have passed sixth grade in order to qualify for the job. At the same time, we should acknowledge that they are underpaid and exposed to extreme dangers.

<sup>10</sup> While governments and the police have been notorious for their lack of effective action, several well-known artists have taken it upon themselves to bring attention to the outrageous situation. Marcela Lagarde y de los Ríos explains that a "particular culture has emerged around the crimes of Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua constituted by how what has happened is addressed, and also by literary and poetic, pictorial, sculptural, musical, photographic, theatrical, filmic, and artistic creations" (xii). Bolaño is not the

only author who has addressed the femicides through writing, although in literature he is probably the most prominent contemporary figure. Other artists include Chilean poet Marjorie Agosín, who published a book of poems in 2006; singers Alejandro Sanz, Alex Ubago, and Manu Chao, among other figures, gave a concert to raise awareness about these cases in 2005; actors Jennifer Lopez and Antonio Banderas starred in a movie about these crimes in 2006; singer Tori Amos released a song about the murders of Juárez in 1999; actress Jane Fonda became involved in the cause in 2004—and these are only some public figures among the many other artists and journalists who have campaigned to bring justice to the women of Ciudad Juárez.

<sup>11</sup> See “Mexico’s Economy: Making the Desert Bloom” in *The Economist*.

<sup>12</sup> With the recent economic world crisis sparked in August 2011, this situation may change once again. China’s economy has gotten stronger because of the devaluation of the US dollar, which has translated into higher salaries for Chinese workers. This, in turn, will probably “benefit” Mexico since plants could be relocated once again to Latin America as Mexican salaries can be kept below current Chinese standards and transportation costs to the US would be greatly reduced (see Oppenheimer’s “Oportunidad Mexicana” in *El País* and “Mexico’s Economy: Making the Desert Bloom” in *The Economist*).

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