Mapping a geography of hell: evil, neoliberalism, and the femicides in Roberto Bolaño's 2666

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MAPPING A GEOGRAPHY OF HELL:
EVIL, NEOLIBERALISM, AND THE FEMICIDES
IN ROBERTO BOLAÑO’S 2666

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Abstract:

In his posthumously published novel 2666, Bolaño addresses the consequences of economic neoliberalism in the U.S.-Mexico border through the fictional city of Santa Teresa. Santa Teresa represents Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, the location of over 500 femicides between 1993 and 2008 and a place named both the “murder capital of the world” and a “model of globalization.” Santa Teresa is at the core of the novel’s conception of evil. This paper analyzes the influences of Charles Baudelaire and Marquis de Sade in Bolaño’s representation of Santa Teresa. This paper also argues that, rather than ending the novel with a solution, Bolaño’s decision to leave only the mystery at the end shocks readers into reconsidering their complicity and mass participation in the new landscape of globalization, framed at the beginning of the novel by the words of Baudelaire as “un oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento.”

Keywords:
2666, evil/mal; globalization/globalización; Mexico/México; Roberto Bolaño
**Introduction: A Mystery to the Solution**

In *The Mystery to a Solution*, John T. Irwin assesses Jorge Luis Borges' difficulties with his story “Ibn Hakkan al-Bokhari, Dead in His Labyrinth,” in which, through the main character, Borges speculates on how any given solution necessarily exhausts the reader’s interest in the mystery. Irwin asks, “How does one both present the analytic solution of a mystery and at the same time conserve the sense of the mysterious on which analysis thrives?” (2). In the tradition of Borges’ analytic detective story, Roberto Bolano’s *2666* addresses the mystery and horror of the killings of Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. In *2666*, Bolano further develops the concepts of evil and hell that he explores in his previous works, particularly in *The Savage Detectives*. In *2666*, comprised of five books respectively titled “La parte de los críticos,” “La parte de Amalfitano,” “La parte de Fate,” “La parte de los crímenes,” and “La parte de Archimboldi,” presents a more complex structure of the multiple narratives, returning all to the center of the mystery, Santa Teresa, the author’s fictional representation of Ciudad Juárez.

In *2666*, Bolano tackles the murder mystery genre on a much larger scale, exploring the mysterious deaths of hundreds of young women in the Mexican border city of Ciudad Juárez. Since the early 1990s, over 500 women have been abducted, murdered, and abandoned in Ciudad Juárez, just across the border from El Paso, Texas. As in previous novels, Bolano again confronts questionable police work, unsatisfied surviving family members, and countless theories as to the cause and/or culprit(s).

The first three books of *2666* focus on the perspectives of a group of academics, a philosopher, and a journalist. In the first two books (“La parte de los críticos” and “La parte de Amalfitano”), the characters’ criticism, reflection, and inquiries lead only to the periphery of the murders. Anxiety, however, takes hold of the philosopher Amalfitano’s psyche when he moves to Santa Teresa. He worries, “¿qué me impulsó a venir aquí [Santa Teresa]? ¿Por qué traje a mi hija a esta ciudad maldita?” (Bolano, *2666* 252). In Book Three, “La parte de Fate,” the journalist Oscar Fate gets close to the mystery and readers are hopeful that he will get to the heart of the story. As he nears the mystery, though, fear escalates and an overwhelming sense of evil drives Fate out of Mexico. Fate’s investigation climaxes in no solution but to escape.

The longest section of *2666*, Book Four: “La parte de los crímenes,” exposes the murders of women in Ciudad Juárez between 1993 and 1997.
In this book Bolaño involves the readers in details of the specific cases and their investigation. As in Book Three, the reader hopes that this will be the section in which the police arrest the criminals or that the next scene will provide the final answer as to who is responsible for the murders. However, the reader’s astonishment grows with each page in this thousand-page novel. As the reader continues to turn the novel’s pages, time passes in vain, as in the lives of the real people in Ciudad Juarez, and the criminals are never caught.

In Book Four the reader experiences a gamut of emotions: sadness turns to anger, which turns to amazement, which finally returns again to anger. Bolaño’s techniques of fragmenting time and space and of shifting narration between different stories force the reader to face the horror of the killings in intimate detail. Most of the victims work in the maquiladora industry. Rape, assault, stabbing, shooting, burning, suffocation, or sometimes a combination of all of these, precede disposal in the desert. A case opens when somebody stumbles upon a body, and most cases close without resolution. Anonymity of the violated female bodies and impunity for the murderers perpetuate the mystery. The only certainty is that “evil” is hidden in the killings.

Book Five of 2666 cycles back to the story of the literary critics in Book One. The critics search in Santa Teresa for the mysterious writer Benno von Archimboldi. However, the backstory of the German soldier-turned-author, and the endless pursuit and investigation of academics, journalists, and police, prove futile. The novel ends at the same place that it begins—without a solution to the mystery. In Book One, when one of the scholar-protagonists asks who is guilty of the murders, a boy responds, “Hay gente detenida desde hace mucho, pero siguen muriendo mujeres” (182). This statement occurs at the beginning of the novel, and it still holds true at the novel’s end.

That the novel ends at the same place it begins is significative to Borges’ speculations on the analytic detective stories. The proposal of a solution would necessarily exhaust the reader’s interest in the mystery and the transgressive force that has been raping, torturing, and murdering hundreds of “poor, brown, young women” (Gaspar de Alba 10). Bolaño has no response but the mystery itself. According to Alexis Candia, the novel could have been classified as part of the hard-boiled detective genre if, at the end, the novel had resolved the search for the truth behind these murders. Candia writes that “2666 tiene una serie de rasgos propios del hard-boiled, tales como la presencia de un enigma (los homicidios de mujeres), la acción violenta, el sexo y la crítica
social” (127). However, 2666 is not classified as hard-boiled detective because “en ningún caso el investigador rehusó la resolución del enigma. El detective pudo fracasar...pero jamás desestimó la indagación del misterio. 2666 da un enorme paso, en este sentido, desvirtuando un pilar central del hard-boiled” (Ibid).

The thousand-page mystery narrative, the unfinished and most ambitious of all of Bolaño’s works, dismantles a main proposition of the hard-boiled detective genre and proposes not a solution to a mystery, but a mystery to a solution. The mystery of the killings in Santa Teresa, regarded by Bolaño as the key to the problems of the world, points out a network of corruption that starts with the characters in the earlier books of 2666 and develops and grows denser as the reader suspects the looming presence of the U.S.-Mexico border. Academics, journalists, cops, and drug lords end up at Santa Teresa. When Oscar Fate says of Santa Teresa, “Este lugar es infernal,” Rosa Amalfitano responds, “Tienes razón” (Bolaño, 2666 395). Bolaño, when asked in an interview about his notion of hell, corroborated that it is “Como Ciudad Juárez” (Braithwaite 69), the real city on which Bolaño bases the fictional Santa Teresa. Bolaño described Ciudad Juárez as “nuestra maldición y nuestro espejo, el espejo desasosegado de nuestras frustraciones y de nuestra infame interpretación de la libertad y de nuestros deseos” (Ibid).

While the murders in real life and in Bolaño’s story persist, the neoliberal maquiladora industry thrives in Santa Teresa, a place where, according to the novel, “el desempleo era prácticamente inexistente” (Bolaño, 2666 328). The parallelism continues, as Ciudad Juárez is also a place regarded as a “model of globalization”3 and “the city of the future,” as chronicled by Lourdes Portillo in her 2001 documentary titled Señorita Extraviada: Missing Young Women. If the solution to the problems of Mexico is globalization, the mystery at the heart of the novel deeply troubles the reading of Santa Teresa, since this site is identified with the real time and space events of Ciudad Juárez, the location of hundreds of femicides.4

As the reader moves through the first three books of 2666, the failure of the narrative (and literature in general) to approach an answer to the crimes can be overwhelming. Key to the reading of globalization in 2666 is the retooling of the traditional mystery novel into an exploration of the possibilities of justice in a new globalized hell. Crucial to our own reading is the fourth section, “La parte de los crímenes,” which forces the reader to confront the brutal reality of Santa Teresa’s deaths, and lays out the crux of
the matter—that in this new hell, “Nadie presta atención a estos asesinatos, pero en ellos se esconde el secreto del mundo” (Bolaño, 2666 439).

A “Voyage” to Hell and the Influence of Baudelaire, Sade, and Pasolini

The mystery of Santa Teresa is wrapped up with the transgression of morality—an attitude of “Hell or Heaven, who cares?” (Baudelaire, “The Voyage” 182)—and the excess of sexual perversion. The women in 2666 are not “just” murdered, but also killed and sexually violated to a horrific, perverted extent. Indeed, Bolaño frames the structure of the entire novel with a quotation from Charles Baudelaire’s poem “The Voyage”—“an oasis of horror in a desert of boredom” (Bolaño, 2666 Trans. ix). Bolaño’s admission that he owned more than ten editions of Baudelaire’s most famous collection of poetry, titled Les Fleurs du Mal in the original French and which includes the poem “The Voyage,” gives insight to the narrative structure of 2666. Bolaño wrote, “Me gustaría comprar todos los libros de Tolstói y de Dostoievski que ya he leído pero que no tengo en mi biblioteca…Lo mismo con Baudelaire (de cuyas Flores del mal he tenido más de diez ediciones)” (Bolaño, Entre paréntesis 221). In addition, in a March 2000 interview for the popular Santiago daily La Tercera, Bolaño named Baudelaire one of his real-life heroes (Brathwaite 48).

In the 1861 edition of Les Fleurs du Mal, Baudelaire gives “The Voyage” particular significance. The final and longest one in the volume, the poem echoes many of the ones that precede it in the collection. “The Voyage” provides a foundation for understanding Bolaño’s work as Baudelaire writes, “Bitter wisdom one gleans from travel! the world, monotonous and small, today, yesterday, forever, gives us back our image: an oasis of horror in a desert of ennui!” (Baudelaire 181; italics ours).

Baudelaire’s poem “The Voyage,” belonging to a section titled “La Mort” [“Death”], describes the human journey in search for answers to the meaning of suffering. “The Voyage” begins with a sense of excitement: “One morning we leave, the brain afire,…these joyful to escape from an infamous fatherland” (Baudelaire 178). As we go deeper into the journey and the poem, however, the tone shifts. The excitement of seeing “the richest cities, the grandest landscapes” turns into the sobering reality of seeing the “greedy tyrant” and “people in love with the brutish lash” (Baudelaire 180, 181). According to Walter Putnam, “The Voyage” ends with a stark truth—that “Baudelaire’s
earthly search for answers has taken him through a succession of revolts only to leave him faced with the inevitability of death” (198). Putnam’s suggestion that in the poem “death reigns supreme” (199) strongly echoes the 2666 characters’ journey to Santa Teresa.

Like in Bolaño’s Book Four, the sixth section of Baudelaire’s “The Voyage” points out that “we have seen, everywhere, without looking for it, from top to bottom of the mortal ladder, the boring spectacle of immortal sin” (Baudelaire 181). Santa Teresa, where all the characters in the novel converge at the end, and the site of the mystery, becomes the “oasis of horror” and the place of “immortal sin.” As previously mentioned, Bolaño offers the mystery to a solution, and it is in Book Four that the author soberly documents the horror which, in this place, nobody seems able to stop—the inevitable, evil force, power, or group responsible for the murders of the women.

Indeed, Book Four in 2666 reminisces of another of Baudelaire’s poems, “Don Juan in Hell.” In this poem, Baudelaire describes a hell in which “women, their open dresses exposing pendant breasts, writhed under a dark sky and, like a herd of sacrificial victims, let trail behind a long drawn-out moan” (26). Bolaño’s depictions of Santa Teresa’s murders in Book Four similarly suggest a cycle of inevitable evil:

Dos días después de que se descubriera el cadáver de Mónica en el baldío de la calle Amistad apareció el cuerpo de otra muerta en la carretera Santa Teresa-Caborca....Muerte por disparo de arma de fuego. A veinticinco metros de donde fue hallada se descubrió el esqueleto de otra mujer, semienterrada en posición decúbito ventral....El estado del cadáver hacía imposible dictaminar las causas de la muerte. Una semana después, cuando ya agosto llegaba a su fin, fue encontrado en la carretera Santa Teresa-Caborca el cuerpo de Jacqueline Ríos, de veinticinco años, empleada en una tienda de perfumería de la colonia Madero....Había muerto por disparos de arma de fuego en el tórax y el abdomen. (Bolaño, 2666 578-79)

These women, found dead in and around Santa Teresa, are, in the words of Baudelaire’s poem, “a herd of sacrificial victims,” appearing week after week.
Throughout his work, some of which was “banned for...transgressive, violent, sacrilegious subject matter” (Jamison 3), Baudelaire wrestles with the mystery of evil by focusing on a literary portrayal of violence against women, a style influenced by the work of Marquis de Sade. Baudelaire concedes, “We must always go back to Sade, that is, to the Natural Man, to explain evil” (qtd. in Baudelaire, trans. Waldrop, xviii). In Book Two of 2666, Bolaño writes an explicit reference to Sade, when professor Amalfitano absentmindedly creates a list of influential philosophers in a desperate attempt to verify the existence of things. Though he leaves out many philosophers, he includes Sade on the list (265). Baudelaire suggests that we must “always go back to Sade...to explain evil,” and Sade’s evil focuses on the obsession over the flesh, as the only evidence of existence in a world turned into a femicide hell. According to Angela Carter, Sade’s work “cites the flesh as existential verification in itself” (26). Sade warns his readers in the opening pages of The 120 Days of Sodom: “I advise the overmodest to lay my book aside at once if he would not be scandalized...friend-reader, you must prepare your heart and your mind for the most impure tale that has ever been told since our world began” (184). In 120 Days, according to Geoffrey Roche, Sade “insists that...the taste for cruelty is shared by all with the strength to express it” (160).

The mystery of evil in 2666’s Book Four parallels the obsession with flesh in Sadean literature. In this book, Bolaño calls attention to the intentional violence against the flesh: “Tenía diecinueve años, era delgada, de tez morena y pelo negro largo. Había sido violada anal y vaginalmente, repetidas veces, según el forense, y el cuerpo presentaba hematomas múltiples que revelaban que se había ejercido con ella una violencia desmesurada” (569). In another instance, a murdered maquiladora worker is found “desnuda de cintura para abajo, con un trozo de madera incrustado en la vagina. La causa de la muerte fueron los múltiples cuchillazos, más de sesenta contó el forense...” (491). In yet another example, a school’s janitor, noticing buzzards, finds a woman “[quien] llevaba una blusa negra y zapatillas negras [pero] tenía la falda arrollada sobre la cintura. No llevaba bragas” (468). When the janitor looks at the woman’s face more closely, “supo que no había muerto aquella noche” (Ibid).

The frequency with which these murders occur suggests a grotesque intentionality. Reminiscent of the desecration of the female body in Sadean literature, Bolaño’s Book Four chronicles the rape, mutilation, and murder of women. Each of the stories disturbingly resembles each other. As Bolaño writes, “Uno de los pechos estaba casi completamente cercenado y en el otro
faltaba el pezón, que había sido arrancado a mordidas... [describing a different woman] unos de sus pechos había sufrido una amputación y el pezón del otro pecho había sido arrancado a mordidas... [describing yet another woman] su pecho derecho había sido amputado y el pezón de su pecho izquierdo arrancado a mordidas" (2666 580-84).

Emphasizing the violence done to woman, Bolaño describes the Santa Teresa prison as “una mujer destazada. Una mujer destazada, pero todavía viva. Y dentro de esa mujer viven los presos” (2666 379). Roche writes that, according to Sade, “To take sexuality to be concerned with communication or harmony at all...is to deny its ‘truth’” (161). In Sadean literature, and also in Bolaño’s 2666, “truth” connects to the torture of the flesh, which redefines Santa Teresa as a modern hell of evil and sin.

In addition to the depth of his literary knowledge regarding those authors, Bolaño was also, as Chris Andrews reminds us, “steeped in cinematic horror, from classics to schlock” (204). Sade’s 120 Days of Sodom, adapted to the screen in 1975 by Pier Paolo Pasolini in Salò, or 120 Days of Sodom, certainly illustrates the grotesque horror that emanates in the hellish journey to the flesh. Pasolini’s change from Sade’s original setting in a seventeenth-century Swiss villa to a country estate in 1944 in the Italian northern fascist republic of Salò, which served as “Mussolini’s last stronghold” (Bachmann 39), brings an appropriate historical framework to Sade’s site of “sacrifice, transgression, and sexuality” (Roche 159). In Salò, Pasolini adds a historical specificity to sadism, which is what Bolaño also does in 2666. Pasolini frames his study of hell and evil within a historical period—a period that film critic Bill Mousoulis describes as “fascism-cum-sadism”—with the Sadean literary tradition. Comparing Pasolini’s Salò and Sade’s literature, Mousoulis concludes that, “in Sade, the dead-end is geographical; in Salò, historical. Both places are ones of death.”

For Bolaño, Santa Teresa is another geographical end and a historical framework for a new place of death. Salò is to the Holocaust what Santa Teresa is to the killings of Ciudad Juárez. Bolaño’s mystery is framed by a geographical setting and historical evil. As Grant Farred argues, “For Bolaño, it is only through genocide that the maquiladora deaths can be properly understood in their analogical relation to the history of large-scale violent death that preceded it....Archimboldi is the figure whose writing, through the ‘wishful’ search for the author, binds a historic, unarguable genocide (in Europe) to another that is in the making (in Central America)” (706).
The back story in 2666 of Benno von Archimboldi, whose identity as a German soldier on the Eastern Front is revealed in Book Five, connects Nazi Germany to contemporary day’s maquiladora industry and neoliberal globalization in Ciudad Juárez. In 2666, Bolaño alludes to fascism and the Holocaust to suggest that Santa Teresa is the new geographical and historical place of hell and evil in our century.

The Femicides

The Holocaust fascinated Bolaño. Prior to writing 2666, Bolaño’s obsession with fascism emerged in his earlier work, Nazi Literature in the Americas (1996). Bolaño mentions the Holocaust as the deepest form of transgression against human nature in the interview he gave to Eliseo Ávarez, published in Revista Turia in June 2005: to the question “What is the most clear manifestation of misery?”, Bolaño responded, “Los niños que mueren de hambre, los niños que mueren por enfermedades fáciles de combatir, los niños que sufren abusos sexuales, los niños que tienen que trabajar, los niños que son maltratados por sus padres. La manifestación más clara de nuestra miseria y de nuestro fracaso como seres humanos es eso y es Auschwitz” (Braithwaite 48). By locating hell and evil in Santa Teresa, Bolaño is also commenting on the “voyage” of evil from the twentieth-century Holocaust to a massacre “in the making” (Parred 706) in Las Americas. Bolaño’s personal experience of Chile under Pinochet’s fascist regime and his subsequent exile underlies the interconnectedness of both worlds. The desaparecidos in Argentina and the connections of the Chilean military to fascism in Europe come to mind. And, as we know, survivors of Auschwitz have described it as a literal, physical hell on earth. In Hell in Contemporary Literature: Western Descent Narratives since 1945, Rachel Falconer devotes a full chapter to the symbolism and reality of “Auschwitz as Hell.” In If This is a Man, Primo Levi alludes to Dante in his account of surviving a year in Auschwitz. Falconer proposes that he does so “both to verify his own experience of Hell — what Dante imagined, the prisoners actually experienced — and to underline the important contrasts — Dante’s Hell is an expression of divine Justizia, Auschwitz of human injustice” (63).

Bolaño sees Auschwitz as a symbol of humanity’s failure. That he saw similarities between the Holocaust and the killings in Ciudad Juárez — to an extent all mass killings have some similarities — suggests that he sees Ciudad Juárez as the contemporary symbol of humanity’s failure.
Indeed, some critics argue that the contemporary femicides in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, evoke some elements of the genocide in World War II (Farred 706, Macaya 137). Sensitive not to equate the Holocaust and the Ciudad Juárez murders, Ángeles Donoso Macaya suggests that Bolaño historicizes the femicide against the backdrop of the Holocaust. According to Macaya, “Bolaño establece una especie de panorama historizante de distintas formas del mal y la violencia, ya que el ordenamiento de la ficción vuelve presentables, esto es, visibles y decibles, las formas del mal sistematizadas del genocidio y el feminicidio” (137).

The repeated absurdity of the now decades-old femicide violence in Juárez evokes the earlier denials of the Holocaust, the violence reminiscent of Sadean literature, and the “voyage” to hell in Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs Du Mal. Bolaño’s modern mystery involves sexual violence, flesh, and desecrated female bodies that converge into a neoliberal hell. In Sadean literature, according to Carter, the violence creates “not an artificial paradise of gratified sexuality but a model of hell, in which the gratification of sexuality involves the infliction and the tolerance of extreme pain” (24). 2666 projects this model into Santa Teresa, a “físico y concreto oasis d’horreur” (Rodríguez de Arce 189).

The writing style in Book Four communicates the intensity of this “oasis de horror.” The journalistic, police-style report actually intensifies the harshness of the reality; the murders have become so normal that they are reported in Book Four in an emotionless, blasé, matter-of-fact way. The reader’s horror builds every time another body is found. Again and again, we read that this body was mutilated and violated, most likely raped, before being killed, discarded, and dumped in the desert. Yet again, a case closes without the conviction of a criminal. In response to a question in Book Three about how the women are killed, Oscar Fate receives the answer, “Eso no está nada claro. Desaparecen. Se evaporan en el aire, visto y no visto. Y al cabo de un tiempo aparecen sus cuerpos en el desierto” (Bolaño, 2666 363).

We quoted previously Bolaño’s image of hell, which is Ciudad Juárez, the basis for Santa Teresa, but critic Ignacio Rodríguez de Arce goes a step further by reminding us that “el infierno y Santa Teresa se equivalen recíprocamente: son análogos. Pero Bolaño nos insinúa algo más. Santa Teresa es simultáneamente nuestra maldición y nuestro espejo, y lo es porque el hombre contemporáneo puede reflejarse en ella para contemplar su maldición; tal maldición no es otra que la tendencia irrevocable al oasis d’horreur”
(186). By using the modern hell in Santa Teresa/Ciudad Juárez as a mirror, Bolaño’s novel challenges the reader to take one more step to recognize that the Baudelarean “oasis de horror” is nothing but our own complicit participation in the systems that perpetuate injustice.

**Horror Rendered as Indifferent Boredom**

Bolaño presents a modern paradigm of postcolonial hell, denies the catharsis of a solution, and leaves the reader knowing that “el secreto del mundo” is hidden in the killings of Santa Teresa’s real counterpart, Ciudad Juárez. At the end, having just read about many killings for which no culprit has been caught, we are left with a “model of globalization” and the “city of the future” (Portillo). Bolaño explicitly points to the structure of neoliberal economics—what Alicia Gaspar de Alba refers to as the structures of dominance and power that oppress and commodify women (63-93)—that makes it possible for a city to be both the “murder capital of the world” and a “model of globalization.” In an interview Pasolini said that his movie *Salo* critiques how “in sadism and in power politics human beings become objects” (qtd. in Bachmann 40). According to biographer Stephen Snyder, the filmmaker “locates the source of evil within the social structure itself” (167).

In the same way, Bolaño criticizes how the women of Santa Teresa have become commodified objects for the selfish advancement of neoliberal economics and globalization. Bolaño mentioned to Ima Sanchís, in an interview originally published in Diario *La Vanguardia* in Barcelona on September 23, 2002, that “el mal es básicamente el egoísmo narrado de diferentes formas” (Braithwaite 81). As Grant Farred writes, ‘‘Why are they killed?’ remains the unaskable question. ‘Why’ cannot be answered without the full commitment of the state to understanding and acting against the violence done to the women, the neoliberal disenfranchisement and the exploitation of the women who live(d) and work(ed) in the time of the maquiladora” (699). In the end, the “oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento” underlines the “unaskable question” which allows the marginalization and killing of “poor, brown, young women” (Gaspar de Alba 10).

Recognizing that horror has been the only result of the investigation takes us to the discussion at the beginning of the article: the framing of the novel after Baudelaire’s poem, and the place where Bolaño’s novel starts—“un oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento” (2666 9). In 2666
the reporter Chucho Flores says that “Cada cierto tiempo [el número de los asesinatos] florecen y vuelven a ser noticia y los periodistas hablan de ellos. La gente también vuelve a hablar de ellos y la historia crece como una bola de nieve hasta que sale el sol y la pinche bola se derrite y todos se olvidan y vuelven al trabajo” (362). Indeed, Bolano said in one of his interviews that he valued “el valor de decir lo obvio cuando todos se callan” (Braithwaite 81). This is important because though the five books of 2666 appear to be telling many stories, the novel really tells one large story—“una historia de terror” (Macaya 132). In 2666, the reporter Guadalupe Ronca! tells the journalist Oscar Fate that her investigations have only led to discovering fear. She admits to experiencing “miedo a todo” (Bolano, 2666 375). She confides to Fate that “Cuando se trabaja en algo relativo a los asesinatos de mujeres de Santa Teresa, una termina teniendo miedo a todo” (Ibid).

Boredom and horror seem counter to the physical evidence of death and bodies and the fact that the murders still remain a secret, a mystery. On the surface, 2666 seems to arrive at that sharp contrast as the only conclusion—that only fear and desensitization come from the investigation of the murders. In Book Three, when Oscar Fate finds out about the murders and is intrigued, he asks his editor if he may write “un retrato del mundo industrial en el Tercer Mundo, un aide-mémoire de la situación actual de México, una panorámica de la frontera, un relato policial de primera magnitud” (373). Fate’s editor, however, denies Fate’s request, telling him to focus only on what he has been assigned to cover while in Mexico—a somewhat boring boxing match.

Fate’s frustration at the situation and his editor’s response mirrors the readers’ frustration that the murders continue without a solution. 2666 ends without a culprit being caught, and readers may feel a sense of despair. However, although Andrews suggests that “the secret of evil is and must remain a secret” (206), the absurd repetition of the killings in Ciudad Juárez (in the midst of a heroic but futile struggle of feminist and local organizations) becomes also a picture of a hell supported by our indifference—apathy next to the femicides translated as “un oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento” (Bolaño, 2666 9). By returning to the framework of the novel, we argue that Bolaño, like Baudelaire, does not offer a solution to the secret; rather, he offers a mystery of evil and horror supported by our complicit boredom. By emphasizing, in Book Three, that “en ellos [estos asesinatos] se esconde el secreto del mundo” (439), Bolaño challenges the reader to ponder the Baudelairean framework of his novel.
In her article “Accountability for Murder in the Maquiladoras,” Elvia Arriola accuses corporate indifference and neglect for the gender violence taking place at the U.S.-Mexico border (Gaspar de Alba 25-61). Arriola argues that the Juárez story is “about systematic abuse and violence against working-class employees,” abuse that is “the result of investor privileges guaranteed under NAFTA and repeated in the Central American Free Trade Argument (CAFTA), which virtually immunize the transnational investor from accountability for harm to the worker, anticipated or not, when conducting business in Mexico” (Gaspar de Alba 28).

2666 exposes not only the effects of NAFTA and the maquiladora industry, but also the indifference of the media and the numbing of audiences to the effect of the sacrificial deaths of Mexican women. Drawing on the Aztec mythical tradition, Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzman, in their edition of Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera, reference the story of Coyolxauhqui, the Aztec Moon Goddess who was sacrificed by her brother Huitzilopochtli in a struggle for power (21). In the Aztec story, Huitzilopochtli, the “God of War,” demanded prisoners for sacrificial offerings (Moraga 147), decapitated Coyolxauhqui, and hurled “her body down the hill to smash into many pieces at the bottom” (Gaspar de Alba 21).

Gaspar de Alba calls attention to the “modern-day Coyolxauhquis in Juárez” (18). The bodies of these young, brown women become, like Coyolxauhqui’s sacrifice to heteropatriarchy, commodities in the twenty-first century consumer society of globalization. Farred claims that death is “a brutal, inexplicable, fact of the neoliberal postcolonial state: the death of the maquiladora women that derives its political effect from its unremarkable, and therefore consequential, regularity” (693). Gaspar de Alba’s article “Poor Brown Female: The Miller’s Compensation for ‘Free’ Trade” calls attention to the etymology of the Spanish word “maquilar” to underline the point of sacrifice of women rendered as indifference:

If a maquiladora is the factory where the miller (the multinational corporations that own the twin-plant industry) grinds the wheat, and if the wheat represents the poor brown female labor force that is ground down, exploited, and discarded, are the murdered women and girls of Juárez the maquila, or miller’s compensation—the extra ounce of revenue in a system that already profits in the billions? Or are they
simply the price that Mexico (the farmer) is paying for the privilege of free trade? (91)

A character in 2666 speaks of this paradox of Santa Teresa being both a “model” city of globalization as well as the murder capital of the world:

Compartiré contigo tres certezas. A: esa sociedad [Santa Teresa] está fuera de la sociedad [the rest of society], todos, absolutamente todos son como los antiguos cristianos en el circo. B: los crímenes tienen firmas diferentes. C: esa ciudad parece pujante, parece progresar de alguna manera, pero lo mejor que podrían hacer es salir una noche al desierto y cruzar la frontera, todos sin excepción, todos, todos. (Bolaño, 2666 339)

Though the city is progressing, this character asserts that the best thing for everyone to do is to leave it. Additionally, another character tells the professor Amalfitano that, in Mexico, “nos vamos al carajo...Los políticos no saben gobernar. La clase media sólo piensa en irse a los Estados Unidos. Y cada vez llega más gente a trabajar en las maquiladoras” (275).

At the center of this place, Bolaño locates a hidden mystery that erases all traces of individual humanity amid a sophisticated and complex system of commoditization. 2666’s techniques of distortion, violence, and displacement represent the effects of globalization at the intersection of the private with the public, the local with the global, and fact with fiction.

The porous border between the private and public worlds, between local and global issues, must also be reexamined. 2666 is not just about Ciudad Juárez. The growing power of corporations and the universal availability of cheap labor are signs of globalization, but so are the international drug trafficking, sexual tourism, and the new black market slave sex trade. Bolaño links the critics’ search in Europe and the journalist’s life in the United States to the more sinister face of globalization in Ciudad Juárez.

A note at the end of 2666 explains the novel’s title, which refers to a quotation in Bolaño’s earlier novel Amulet (1999). In Amulet, the protagonist Auxilio Lacouture says,

la Guerrero, a esa hora, se parece sobre todas las cosas a
Auxilio Lacouture presents a dismal portrait of death, sin, horror, numbness, and indifference.

Baudelaire’s poem “The Voyage” also suggests that the journey into the hell of Santa Teresa merely “gives us back our image.” By emphasizing the complicity of multinationals, the media and the police, 2666 creates an image of ourselves and the complicity of readers as we look at “un oasis de horror en medio de un desierto de aburrimiento,” the quote by which Bolaño prefaces and, in effect, summarizes the whole novel. Bolaño also suggests to us the mystery and its solution. 2666, and especially Book Four, is Bolaño’s call to action for justice in the midst of systemic indifference and societal quietude. By traveling to hell, the reader may, from the “bitter wisdom one gleans from travel” (Baudelaire 181), be galvanized to action so that we may prevent the world’s future from turning, in 2666, into a “forgotten cemetery,” an endless burial site of murdered and discarded women.

NOTES

Lack of official statistics from the Mexican government or police makes it difficult to report the exact number of deaths. Varying figures have been published. The anthology compiled by Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán cites the death of over five hundred women between 1993 and 2008 (Gaspar de Alba 3).

According to Manfred B. Steger in Globalization: A Very Short Introduction (Oxford University Press, 2009, 2nd ed.), globalization is "an uneven process, meaning that people living in various parts of the world are affected very differently by this gigantic transformation of social structures and cultural zones" (11).

In Trama de una injusticia: feminicidio sexual sistémico en Ciudad Juárez (Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2009), Julia Monarrez writes that "En la década de los noventa las feministas introdujeron el concepto de feminicidio, lo que nos permitió definir al asesinato de mujeres como un crimen fálico de supremacía masculina" (25).

Contemporary media has recently improved the publicity of the Juárez killings, but, as Rachel Falconer points out, ten years had to pass before this publicity (2-3). Furthermore, it remains unclear to this day how many women have been killed and for what purpose, and many of the cases are closed by the police despite being unsolved.

Walter Putnam explains the phrase “oasis of horror”: “This antithetical linking of oasis and horror becomes plausible if one recognizes the horrible suffering that makes up our lives; in other words, to live is to know the horror, and every breath that gives life also reminds us of our mortality” (211).

Roland Barthes describes this desecration of the female body typical in Sadean literature in the following manner: “Woman is destroyed: she is wrapped up, twisted about, veiled, disguised so as to erase every trace of her anterior features (figure, breasts, sexual organs); a kind of surgical and functional doll is produced, a body without a front part (structural horror and flouting), a monstrous bandage, a thing” (123).

According to Geoffrey Roche, in Sadean literature, “action moves on to frenzied rutting, the participants and their victims dissolving into a single mass of flesh” (170). Bolaño makes this image real: the Santa Teresa prison is a “single mass of flesh,” one that is a “woman who’s been hacked to pieces.”

Page numbers are not available for this article, which was found in an online journal.

See previous note.

Other critics have offered a similar viewpoint. Ángeles Donoso Macaya asserts that one of the main goals of 2666 is: “la exhibición macabra de los excesos de la violencia y el mal en sus distintas formas, tanto domésticas como estatales” (132). Juan Carlos Galdo argues that “En 2666 existe una deliberada intención, de trazar una genealogía del mal, es decir, de historiarla, y, con más precisión, de seguir sus evoluciones (o circunvoluciones) a lo largo del siglo XX” (27).
14 As Macaya writes, “Sugerir que en 2666 se establece una conexión entre el genocidio de la Segunda Guerra Mundial y el feminicidio en México a finales de siglo XX, no implica sugerir que la novela otorgue una perspectiva deshistorizada del Holocausto” (137). For a detailed exploration of the ethics of calling another genocide a “holocaust,” please also see Alan S. Rosenbaum’s book *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide*.

15 Rodríguez de Arce adds later, “Ello equivale muy borgianamente a afirmar que el infierno somos nosotros, que está dentro de nosotros y es la maldición de nuestra alma contemporánea herida por la insistente pulsión hacia el oasis d’horreur, su imagen reflejada en el espejo de Stendhal” (186-87).

16 Farred continues: “In 2666’s terms this is a question that, within the context of a necropolitical boomtown where everyone—more or less, of course—accepts the killings as the cost of doing business, is rendered at once evocative and meaningless. It is the question that must be asked, it is the question that is beyond—or, worse, without possible—redress” (699). Furthermore, Ignacio Rodríguez de Arce asserts, “González Rodríguez evidencia con claridad en su crónica-ensayo el silencio cómplice y protector de las autoridades, cuyas declaraciones destacan por las omisiones, así como un elemento adicional que otorga, si cabe, un mayor grado de alevosía a estos crímenes: cierto rencor social que se ensaña con víctimas pobres y débiles” (183-84). Publications by Sergio González Rodríguez cited by Rodríguez de Arce are: the novel *Huesos en el desierto* (2002) and *México. Intolerable Killings: Ten years of abductions and murders in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua*.

17 Angela Carter’s analysis of Sade’s literature can also apply to Bolaño’s 2666: “the whip hand is always the hand with the real political power and the victim is a person who has little or no power at all, or has had it stripped from him. In this schema, male means tyrannous and female means martyrised, no matter what the official genders of the male and female beings are” (24). Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Georgina Guzmán’s *Making a Killing: Femicide, Free Trade, and La Frontera* calls attention to issues of injustice that intersect between gender, race, and power especially at the U.S.-Mexico border, and in their book critic Elvia Arriola emphasizes that “the unspoken element in the discourse is the multinational corporations’ complicity with Mexican officials in disregarding the health, safety, and security needs of the Mexican women and girls who work in the maquiladoras...Juárez, like many other border towns affected by NAFTA, may have factories and cheap jobs, but...hostility against the poor working women—who form the majority of those employed by the maquiladoras—has intensified” (Gaspar de Alba 27-28). Gaspar de Alba further points out that we only know about these women because they have died (4-5). Their deaths, not their lives, have brought them fame. Gaspar de Alba references a line from Marjorie Agosín’s *Secrets in the Sand* collection of poems about the murdered women of Ciudad Juárez: “All we know about them / is their death” (qtd. in Gaspar de Alba 4).

18 Macaya suggests that readers may despair because “La novela no plantea
ningún tipo de solución ni cierre, de hecho no podría decirse que 2666 tenga claramente un principio o un final” (139). In this same vein, some critics such as Macaya and Espinosa have proposed that the parts of the five-part novel can be switched without making a big difference because the novel does not progress toward a solution at the end. According to Macaya, “Las distintas ‘partes’ podrían ser leídas en otro orden y el resultado sería similar” (139). Espinosa argues that the five parts do not have to be read linearly: “Cinco partes, no cinco capítulos, que pueden ser leídas de manera autónoma, fragmentaria, o interconectada-no necesariamente de manera lineal-en términos de conjunto” (72).

19 Coyolxauhqui has served as a symbol for the mutilation of Mexicanas and Chicanas under the structures of patriarchy, domination and war. As Cherrie Moraga states, “This ancient myth reminds Mexican women that, culturally-speaking, there is no mother-woman to manifest who is defined by us outside of patriarchy. We have never had the power to do the defining. We wander not in search of our dead children, but our lost selves, our lost sexuality, our lost spirituality, our lost sabiduría” (147).

20 Farred further writes that “Santa Teresa, like neoliberal spaces everywhere (and the states to which those spaces belong), lives in the time of the maquiladora…. For the entire nation-state that is Mexico, we might go so far as to say, there is no time outside of the maquiladora: the maquiladora instantiates the neoliberal state that incarnates death” (695).

WORKS CITED


